Dick Kent *with the* Malemute Mail

MILTON RICHARDS

Dick Kent

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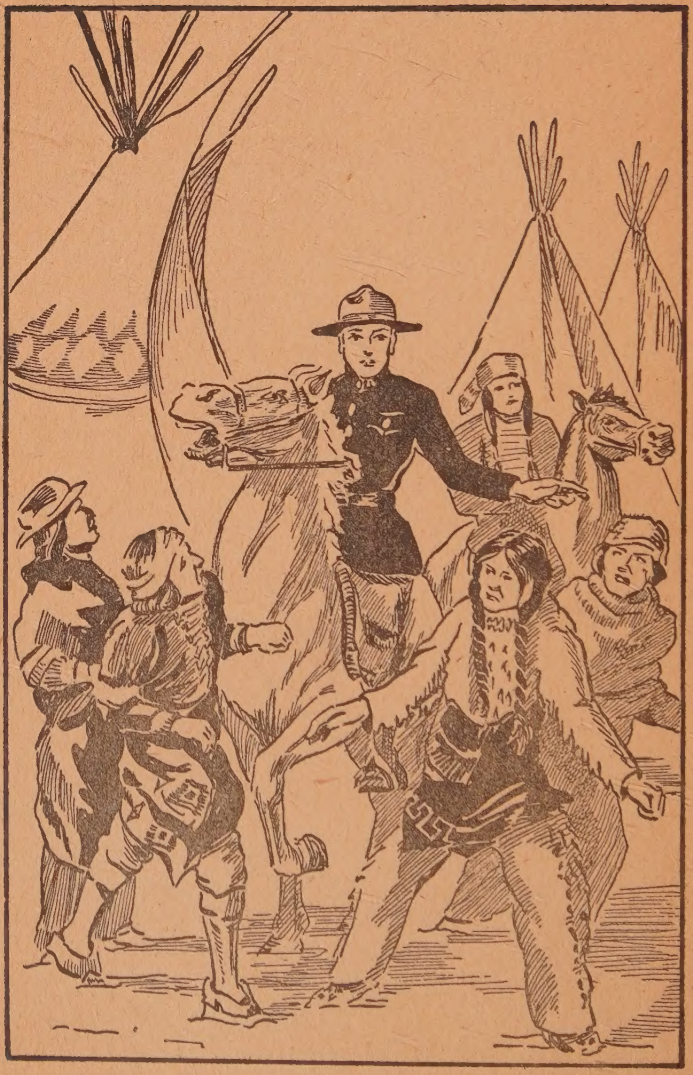

"Bring the two white men here at once," he ordered.
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Dick Kent and the Malemute Mail

By MILTON RICHARDS

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"Dick Kent with the Mounted Police"
"Dick Kent in the Far North"
"Dick Kent with the Eskimos"
"Dick Kent, Fur Trader"

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Dick Kent with the Malemute Mail

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DICK KENT WITH THE MALEMUTE MAIL

CHAPTER I

A CREEPING MENACE

A DISCOURAGED, dishevelled human figure crossed a narrow woodland to the west of a chain of hills, thence made his way slowly down to a sun-baked valley or depression, many miles in extent. The valley was rough, broken, repellent to the eye. For the most part unverdant, it ran in a northeasterly direction—bleak, uninviting, monotonous—here and there rutted with long gray drifts of silt and sand.

No trail of any sort traversed that sinister, malevolent wild. Except for an occasional poplar or charred, broken stump of spruce or jack-pine, there were few landmarks to relieve the discouraging prospect. However, at one end of the valley, scintillating like a silver coin in the bright rays of the sun, the traveller discerned a small lake, fringed with green.

In the center of the narrow green strip, on one

side of the lake, stood the cabin of a prospector. The traveller regarded it impassively for a moment before he went on.

Still hours high, the sun struck its bright rays across the land: a glare of white in the somnolent valley, a sheen of mirrored brilliance where it radiated over the placid, blue waters of the lake. A deep hush had fallen over the earth. Below the wide, azure arch of the sky feathered voyagers of the air coasted silently to unknown haunts, apparently the only living things in the dead gray world around them.

The figure hurried on. The sight of the cabin had acted as a slight spur to his jaded body. He pushed forward steadily until he had made his way over the narrow strip of green and up the path to the house. He knocked listlessly at the door, then stood silently, as might a criminal awaiting the heavy hand of the law.

A half-breed admitted him, white teeth shining in an expansive welcoming grin.

"Come in, Meester Davis. By Gar!—et ees good. You!"

An old man hobbled excitedly across the room, his long white beard flaring out in the sudden breeze from the doorway. His palsied, rheumatic hands crept up slowly to the younger man's shoulders and remained there for a moment in silence.

"Davis," he declared simply, "you are welcome back."

A wan smile parted the other's lips.

"I'm glad to see you again, Mr. Harbinson."

The old man motioned to a rough, worn bench. "Sit down, man, sit down. You must be tired." He turned to the half-breed. "Baptiste, hurry something to eat for Mr. Davis."

While the preparations for the meal were proceeding, the old man talked steadily. Presently Davis, unable longer to postpone the ordeal, face red with humiliation, blurted out:

"Mr. Harbinson, I did not succeed in my mission. I have failed."

"Failed!" exclaimed the old man.

"Yes," Davis rose from his seat, voice quavering, "yes, I can see no hope for us. The doctor was gone. I got nothing. Nothing!"

Gloomily he paced back and forth across the rough floor of the sparsely furnished room. The eyes of the white prospector and the half-breed followed him curiously.

"I was afraid of that," Harbinson declared presently, "I knew you had a chance of missing him. It is a terrible thing!"

Davis stopped short in the middle of his nervous pacing and raised one arm in a hopeless gesture.

"Even if I'd seen him, it might have done us no

good. The entire north country is undermined with the thing, especially among the Indians. It's working gradually south. The missions are filled to overflowing." His voice lowered to a husky whisper. "It's awful, Harbinson. Awful!"

The old man gazed dully at his partner through a long interval of silence. Davis spoke again:

"Since I left here two weeks ago, has there been any new development?" He looked searchingly at the other.

"Yes, it's reached the village."

"That's only ten miles away," Davis calculated roughly. "How did you find this out? Send Baptiste?"

"No. Pierre La Lond passed here two days ago and told us."

"You didn't let him in?"

Harbinson evaded the other's eyes. Baptiste, advancing to the table with a steaming kettle swinging from one hand, stopped short and shot a questioning gaze at the two.

"Yes, I couldn't stop him. We were busy at something. He opened the door and walked in. It was too late then."

"That's unfortunate," Davis scowled. "He should have known better."

"But what am I to do? Sooner or later, we'll be exposed. We can't always be isolated. Another

thing, we'll soon need more supplies. Our grub-stake's getting low."

"There's the post thirty miles south of here."

"Closed up," said Harbinson briefly. "La Lond told us that too. Won't be able to get any supplies there."

"We'll live on a meat diet then," Davis declared grimly.

"Scurvy!"

"That's much better than the horror of this other thing."

Harbinson did not reply. Stillness fell over the room again. Davis resumed his seat on the rough bench and sat with his head in his hands until Baptiste announced that the meal was ready. As he ate, the young prospector could hear Harbinson's asthmatic breathing and the scraping of the half-breed's moccasined feet across the floor.

Hungry though he had been, he had little taste for food. His mind was too much upset. The disappointing news he had brought back to his partner, he well knew had been a heavy blow indeed.

Later, the three men walked outside, seeking the warm sunshine that fell aslant across the land. The lake still shimmered under the bright glare. A few birds winged their way across the sky. Desolate at all times, the sleepy valley now held no trace of life anywhere. Off to the westward the hills and

rocks formed a dun labyrinth, and from the crest of the nearest slope one looked down over heights and depths, broken ridges, crooked valleys—all pervaded, choked with an awful solitude.

"Well," croaked the old prospector finally, "what's to be done? We've not only ourselves to think about —but others. It's late in the fall now. By spring there won't be a single soul north of the Mackenzie."

Davis studied the problem, as he had done almost continually since he had left Fort Garrison a week before.

"Only one thing we can do," he answered quietly.

"What's that?"

"Notify the police. It's our only hope."

"I hadn't thought about that," said Harbinson brightening. "You'd go to the Mackenzie River Barracks?"

"Yes, I'll carry the news there. It will be much quicker than to wait for their regular patrol. I know Inspector Cameron. He'll act promptly."

"Hate to see you start out again, Davis, so soon."

"It can't be helped. I'll leave in the morning. But this time, Harbinson, let me warn you. Keep everybody away. Do you hear? Nobody must come here. If necessary, enforce this rule at the point of a gun. But enforce it you must."

The hands of the old prospector were shaking.

He thrust them in his pockets to hide the fact from his partner. But he could not conceal from the other's inquiring gaze the flush that flooded his cheeks, the unearthly sparkle of his eyes.

"You're not feeling well," accused the younger man.

"No! No! I'm all right. Don't think that," quavered Harbinson. "It's not that."

The young man, apparently, believed him.

"It's the worry, I suppose. But forget it, Charley. We'll beat this thing yet. Inspector Cameron will see the necessity of doing something at once. You can always rely on the mounted."

For the remainder of the day nothing more was said on the subject. Baptiste and the younger man busied themselves about the place, while Harbinson retired to his bunk and slept for several hours. On the following morning, when Davis rose early, neither the old man nor the half-breed were astir. He prepared a hasty breakfast, deciding not to wake either one of them. In another hour he would be on the trail.

But Harbinson, it appeared, had not slept well. He had rolled and tossed in a high fever. He lay now in his bunk, his glassy eyes furtively watching his partner. When chance took Davis close to the bunk, he closed his eyes, feigning sleep. This simulation continued until the younger man had com-

pleted his preparations and had departed. An indescribable look flitted over the old prospector's unutterably weary and fevered face. His lips trembled a phrase;

"Out in time, thank God!—good luck!"

Then he slid over to the side of his bunk, dressed with trembling haste and, hobbling over, began ransacking a crude pine box, containing articles of apparel. Finally, he found the object of his search: a red flannel shirt, which he tore apart.

He crossed the room with the garment under his arm, picked up a hammer by the door and stole outside. He reappeared less than two minutes later, staggering toward his bunk. His expression was pathetic. He made several futile efforts to remove his clothes. In the hollow of his cheeks, over his forehead, along each side of his neck a raging temperature had left its seal.

Twenty minutes later, when Baptiste rose noiselessly and went outside, he started back in amazement. Again his gaze went back, as if fascinated, to the flannel signal, fluttering just above the door. A groan escaped him.

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!" he choked. "Et ees zee red flag of quarantine!"

CHAPTER II

INSPECTOR CAMERON TAKES CHARGE

THE orderly approached Inspector Cameron's desk and saluted.

"Man here, sir, from up-country. Calls himself Davis. Wants to see you, sir."

"What about?" snapped the inspector.

"He didn't say, sir, except that it was something important. Says he knows you."

"Davis—Davis——" mused Cameron, chewing reflectively on his cigar. "Perhaps I do. Yes—young prospector from up near Garrison. Show him in."

Inspector Cameron's brow wrinkled when the man appeared. If he had ever seen this uncouth fellow before, he could not place him. Surely this was not the Davis he knew. Why this man looked old—a heavy black beard, hair unkempt, disreputable, dirty clothing. But the voice—hah!—— Davis after all, the Davis he knew. He extended a hand.

"Heavens, man, how you deceived me. You look terrible. What's happened? Nothing serious, I hope."

The visitor dropped into a seat with a sigh of weariness.

"Couldn't be much worse, inspector. I've trekked three hundred miles. Tired. Sleepy. About all in. You see——"

"Yes, Davis. What is it?"

"Smallpox!"

Cameron's face blanched.

"You don't say. How bad?"

"Terrible. My country's rotten with it. Whole viilages gone. Mostly among the Indians so far. But the whites are getting it too. Fort Garrison has closed its doors. I saw the red flag of quarantine waving from twenty different cabins on my way here."

Cameron's jaws clamped over his cigar and his steel eyes flecked.

"Why haven't I heard about this before?" he demanded. "It's only two months since we patroled that region."

"There wasn't a trace of it then," Davis informed him. "You know how these things come. Suddenly. No explaining it. Two weeks after I heard about the first case, it had ravaged the whole countryside."

"Have you been exposed yourself?"

"Not that I know of."

The inspector leaned back in his chair, his arms folded, his gaze seeming to rest upon the papers in

the letter-tray on his desk. He picked up his fountain pen and turned it thoughtfully in his hand.

"This thing couldn't have come at a more inopportune time. Richardson is off on patrol and won't be back for three weeks. Three days ago a murder was committed over at Run River, and Pearly has gone to investigate. Corporal Rand is confined to barracks here, suffering from an attack of pneumonia. I haven't an available man right now."

"But what's to be done? How do you propose to combat this thing? Haven't you a supply of medicine here at barracks?"

"If I had a room full of it, it wouldn't help us in the least. There's only one antidote. You inject it in the arm with a hypodermic needle."

"Where can this stuff be obtained?"

"Big cities outside. The only places. Edmonton is the closest."

"Hopeless!" gasped Davis. "Half the population of the North will be swept out of existence before you can get help from there."

Cameron shook his head.

"Not quite as bad as that, I hope. We have the government telegraph and the radio. Within twenty-four hours Edmonton will send out a relief expedition. We'll meet them."

As he spoke, the inspector reached forward and

touched the buzzer on his desk. The orderly appeared, saluted.

"Get me the swiftest Indian runner you can find. Send him here. I want you to hurry, constable."

Then Cameron drew a sheet of paper towards him and began to write. When he had finished, Davis inquired:

"I suppose it will be necessary to wait until one of your men returns before you send out someone to meet that relief party?"

"No, not in this emergency. I've already decided. There are three young men living over at Fort Good Faith who will be glad to help me. One is a nephew of Factor MacClaren, another a young chap named Dick Kent, while the third boy is a young Indian scout called Toma. Two of them, Kent and Toma, we had planned to send to the mounted police training barracks at Regina last year, but the school was crowded and they have been compelled to remain here awaiting further word from the commissioner."

"These boys are dependable, you say?"

"Absolutely."

Davis eyed the other reflectively.

"I can go myself if you wish, inspector."

"You're in no condition," Cameron replied promptly. "What you need is a rest. But don't worry about this thing, Davis. We'll be able to check it before many weeks."

"Weeks!" Davis' voice was sepulchral.

"Yes, weeks," Cameron reiterated. "And we can be glad that it isn't months."

He turned to the papers lying on his desk with a gesture of dismissal.

"Drop in at the barracks and they'll fix you up. I'd like to thank you for bringing me this information, Mr. Davis."

Soon after Davis had gone, the orderly entered the room, accompanied by a tall, sinewy young man, the Indian runner. The police official greeted the native with a curt nod, rose and pressed an envelope in his hand.

"Take this to Dick Kent at Fort Good Faith. He's a young man about your own age. Hurry through as quickly as you can. It is very important. I will pay you well."

The Indian smiled as he tucked the letter away in an inner pocket, grinned again for no apparent reason and stalked silently out of the room. The orderly still stood, waiting for his own dismissal. Cameron regarded his subordinate for a moment, then turned quickly and hurried over to his desk.

"Constable, we have much to do. Smallpox epidemic in the country north of us. Sweeping down this way. Very serious condition. We must move quickly. I'll ask you to wait here while I write a message to be sent out by telegraph to Edmonton.

Instruct Mr. Cooley, the operator, to repeat his message at least three times."

The orderly saluted, but made no reply. Like a red-coated statue, he stood while Cameron wrote quickly. He received the message with another salute, turned on his heel, his spurs clattering as he strode to the door. The inspector breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well, that's settled."

His brow wrinkled with thought. Slowly he turned again to the work before him. He was busy when the door opened and the orderly reappeared. One look at the face of his subordinate told him that something was amiss.

"Yes, Whitehall, what's the matter now?"

The orderly hesitated, clearing his throat.

"I'm sorry to report, sir, that we won't be able to establish communication with Edmonton or outside points. The wires are down. Big forest fire raging to the south of us, sir. The operator says it will be days before the damage can be repaired."

In his agitation, the inspector again rose to his feet. His eyes snapped.

"Tell Mr. O'Malley, our radio expert, I want to see him. Bring him here at once."

Whitehall saluted and went out.

CHAPTER III

SMOKE!

SANDY MACCLAREN put down the moccasin he had been attempting to patch and turned to his friend, Dick Kent, who had been listening attentively to Sandy's absorbing narrative. The story dealt with the exciting experiences of one Clement McTavish, Scotch prospector and trapper, who had returned from the foothills a few days before. McTavish had relinquished his former trap-line, seceding his claims to a more ambitious enemy—a colony of murderous grizzlies.

Dick laughed. "You mean, Sandy, that those grizzlies drove him out?"

Sandy picked up the moccasin again and scowled at the results of his handiwork.

"Exactly. They drove him out. And he was glad to go, too. There wasn't just one or two to contend with—but a whole regiment. The country was simply infested with 'em. McTavish is so badly frightened that you couldn't get him to go back with a bodyguard."

"I think I talk McTavish," Toma began eagerly. "Where you say he find all these bad grizzlies?"

"Four miles east of Lake Florence."

"I think I like to go there," Toma made the assertion as calmly, as unconcernedly, as if he spoke of entering the next room.

"Me too," said Dick, quite ungrammatically. "I'd like to investigate that story. My personal opinion is that McTavish was spoofing you."

"Sure," retorted Sandy. "What I thought myself. But there are a few things rather difficult to explain. McTavish brought back five grizzly pelts and his arm in a sling. Killed five of 'em! Think of that! But in a fight with one of them he got clawed up. Hurt pretty bad."

"I'm going," said Dick with quiet determination.

"I go too," Toma echoed.

"Well, if you fellows are willing to risk it," declared Sandy, not very enthusiastically, "you'd better include me in your party. Personally, I'm not very keen about going. I'll have another talk with McTavish and——"

A knock sounded at the door.

"Come in!" Sandy shouted.

Factor MacClaren stood framed in the doorway.

"Thought I'd find you here. Dick,—someone to see you. A runner from Mackenzie River. It's important. He's waiting out in the trading room"

Dick rose excitedly and streaked for the door. He pushed his way past the factor, hurried down the hallway and soon emerged in the spacious storeroom of the company. For a brief interval he paused, gaze darting through the crowd, then made his way unerringly to a tall young Indian, who stood waiting near the counter.

"I'm Dick Kent," said that young man.

"By Gar, monsieur, I glad I find you here. Et ees veree important thees letter from Inspector Cameron. He told me to geeve et in your own hands."

With trembling fingers Dick broke the seal. He read:

"Mr. Richard Kent,
"Fort Good Faith,
"Province of Alberta.
"Dear Richard:

"I am compelled to ask you and your two friends, Sandy MacClaren and John Toma, to undertake a very urgent and important journey on behalf of the people in this territory. I received this morning the news of a terrible smallpox epidemic, two hundred miles northwest of here—an epidemic which can only be checked through the media of outside help and assistance.

"You will proceed at once to Peace River

Crossing and report there to Inspector Anderson, who will give you further instructions. I have notified Edmonton of our plight and have asked the authorities of that city to send out a relief expedition, which you are to meet and conduct back by the shortest route to Mackenzie River Barracks.

"I need not impress upon you the necessity of haste. Many lives hang in the balance. May good fortune attend you.

"Sincerely,
"Jason C. Cameron,
"Inspector R. N. W. M. P.,
"Mackenzie River Barracks."

His face very sober, Dick thrust the letter in his pocket, thanked the messenger and hurried back through the hallway in time to meet Sandy and Toma, both of whom were laughing and scuffling as they came up.

"Hey! What is it?" Sandy piped out in a tone of voice intended to be jocular. "Invitation to a wedding or a message from the War Department? We're dying to hear."

Sandy checked himself, however, as he perceived Dick's serious look.

"Why—what's the matter?"

"Smallpox north of the Mackenzie. A terrible

epidemic. Inspector Cameron has asked us to go south to meet a relief expedition, which is being sent up from Edmonton. We leave at once."

"What! Right now?"

"Just as soon as we can get ready. You boys pack your things together while I see Mr. MacClaren and arrange for the supplies—our grubstake. We'll take our ponies for the first stage of the journey."

The boys separated hurriedly, each going to his own particular task, nimble fingers and hands making short work of their preparations. Within thirty minutes they had "packed" one of the company's ponies and had their own saddled and bridled. It was exactly two o'clock by the factor's watch when they bolted into their seats and waved an enthusiastic farewell. A short time later they cantered across the meadow and swung south on a well-beaten trail.

At Fort Bentley, three days later, they secured fresh mounts and another pack-horse. It was while they were resting for a few hours here that they received their first disappointing news.

"Big fire raging to the south of here," stated Nesbitt, the factor. "The area affected is wide—hundreds of square miles, lying on the east side of the Peace. Unless you make a wide detour, you'll never get through. It will be impossible to travel along the direct route to Peace River Crossing."

The faces of the three messengers fell.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Sandy.

"My advice to you," Factor Nesbitt hurried on, "is to proceed straight west to Fort Vermilion, thence travel along the west side of the river until you reach the Crossing."

"Will there be any chance to get a boat at Vermilion?" Dick asked.

"I should think so. Company boats will be running up to Peace until the freeze-up."

The boys decided to go that way. Both Dick and Sandy had visited Fort Vermilion on a previous occasion. They recalled with a great deal of pleasure their meeting with Sheridan Lawrence, the intrepid pioneer, who had achieved almost world-wide renown for his enterprise and foresight. There in the heart of a wilderness were hundreds of acres of cultivated fields, mills, an electric light plant, and the bustling activity of a progressive modern village.

Lawrence possessed launches and boats of his own and would be eager to help in a worthy cause. With this valuable assistance, the boys would be able to make the trip from Fort Vermilion to Peace River Crossing in a very short time.

"It's our best plan," approved Dick. "Do you suppose, Mr. Nesbitt, that the fire has worked very far north?"

"I couldn't say. All I know is that it's one of

the worst we have had in years. A trapper who arrived here yesterday from that region reported that it had destroyed the government telegraph line and had completely wiped out Jess Haldane's trading post on Little Brush Creek."

"Little Brush Creek!" Sandy frowned at the information. "Why, that's only about twenty miles south of the trail we propose to take now—the one to Fort Vermilion."

"No," said Dick, turning to his chum. "It's farther than that. I'd call it a good fifty miles."

"Well, have your own way. But what's fifty miles to a fire like that? By the time we get there, it may be raging not only south but north of the trail as well. You can't deny it."

"It's quite possible," Dick agreed.

"True enough," appended Nesbitt. "I'm a little afraid that no matter which way you go, south to Peace River Crossing or west to Fort Vermilion, you stand a good chance of meeting the fire."

"Tell you what we can do," proposed Sandy. "We'll strike out for the Peace, not west, but northwest of here and follow it up to Fort Vermilion."

Dick and Nesbitt both laughed.

"Take us hundreds of miles out of our way and through a country almost impassable," Dick objected. "Not a single trail to guide us. No, it would

be foolish to attempt it. Our best plan is to follow the Vermilion trail and then, if necessary, circle around the fire."

With considerable misgiving, they started out. Three days from Fort Bentley they made their way into an enveloping cloud of smoke, so thick and dark that at times it was almost impossible to see the sun. It formed a huge blanket which wrapped the earth. Hourly, it grew denser; breathing more difficult. It soon became apparent that they would be unable to get through. Turning to their right, they entered a densely wooded area, groping and gasping for breath. At times it was almost as dark as night. The smoke which settled around them was of a greenish tinge. It crept up the coulees and hollows in twisting snake-like form, while above the treetops swirled a heavy black cloud.

That night the stars were hid, but off to the southeast the sky was an orange curtain of fire. Its lurid glow lit up the horizon, a ghastly and awesome sight, giving the impression that the earth itself was being devastated, devoured by the ruthless monster of flame.

On and on the boys hurried in an effort to pass safely around the terrible conflagration. Worry and apprehension shadowed the faces of the three as they paused for their evening meal. Little was said. Their eyes were smarting and their throats burned.

In spite of their weariness, the ponies grew restless and frightened, pawing and stamping the ground, sometimes raising their heads and, with distended nostrils, neighing plaintively.

Again the boys pushed on. Dick took the lead, wondering how much longer he and his two companions could bear up under the strain. Fortunately the coming of night did not interfere materially with their progress. The forest was illuminated. The ghostly reflection of the fire was cast across their path.

Every hour was taking them closer and closer to the northern end of the great conflagration. Not far ahead they could see the flaming blood-red sheet. Its close proximity struck terror in their hearts. It was a race with death. Their only advantage was the help of the wind, from the northwest, whose chill, unabating blasts contrived to keep the oncoming fury somewhat in check. If the wind fell, their only hope of escape lay in a precipitous retreat to the north.

"We'll make it," said Sandy, moistening his parched lips, "if that northwester continues to hold. But it may die down before midnight. Sometimes I think that it doesn't blow as hard as it did a few hours ago."

"We must get through, Sandy," Dick declared grimly. "If necessary, we'll ride our horses until

they drop. Think of the lives that hang in the balance."

Shortly after midnight they approached so close to the fire that the stillness through which they had been travelling gave place to a rumbling, crackling roar. A withering, scorching heat came out to them. The ponies seemed to stagger under their burdens. Dick, who was in the lead, waved his arm encouragingly.

"A few more miles," he called.

"No can make!" Toma's voice suddenly rose above the deafening roar about them. "My pony him no walk any farther."

Dick and Sandy dismounted quickly and went back to where the young guide's horse stood quivering and panting. Toma loosened the cinches and drew off the saddle just as the exhausted beast sank to the ground. Each one of the boys knew what was about to happen —what ought to be done—but each waited for the others to move.

"You take 'em what supplies you can from pack-horse," Toma ordered.

"Yes," said Dick, "the rest we'll have to leave here. Throw your saddle on the pack-horse, Toma, and lead him up where the other ponies are. Wait there for me."

Sandy turned a white face in the direction of his chum.

"Are you really going to do it, Dick?" he quavered.

"Hate to," answered the other, attempting to conceal the tremor in his voice. "But hurry on, Sandy. I'll join you in just a moment."

Determinedly he turned, one hand trembling above his holster and walked over to where the doomed pony lay.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRE PATROL

A FEW hours before daybreak they had successfully circled the fire and had reached a sparsely wooded height of land. So tired and worn out were the three messengers, that as soon as they had picketed out their ponies, they crawled into their blankets without troubling to prepare something to eat. Dick had almost fallen asleep when he was startled by a most peculiar sound—a sound so unusual and different from anything that he had ever heard since coming to the northern wilderness, that he sat bolt upright, wondering if his senses had not suddenly deserted him.

The metallic thub, thub, thub grew louder. He sat staring in the darkness, bewildered, a little frightened, and yet very curious to know its cause. More than anything else, it sounded like a high-powered motor boat, such as he had often seen and heard near his own home on the Great Lakes, back in the United States. Yet it was not a motor boat. They were still forty miles from the Peace River,

and no body of water of any extent lay between them and the river.

Then, suddenly, he had it. An airplane! His mouth curved in a smile of wonder and admiration. An airplane! What was it doing here? With an unearthly howl, he bounded to his feet and was soon shaking Sandy and Toma.

"Wake up! Wake up!" he shouted. "Listen to that!"

Daubing one hand across his sleep-dimmed eyes, Sandy gave vent to an ejaculation:

"For the love of Pete! Where did that come from?"

Immediately he broke forth in a howl of glee, pointing a finger at Toma. In all his long acquaintance with the young Indian, Dick had never seen the guide display any great amount of fear; yet he was frightened now. He sat huddled in his blankets, frozen with a nameless panic. Here was something beyond his ken and experience—to him an inexplicable, supernatural thing: A noise from the heavens, some horrible monster swooping down upon them from the black vault of the sky.

"What you—you call 'em that?" he finally stammered.

"Airplane," said Sandy.

"A boat that flies through the air," Dick elucidated. "What do you suppose it's doing here?"

The sound grew louder and presently the plane alighted less than two hundred yards away. The boys raced madly along through the darkness, finally coming out in an open space, where they could see a dark blur and hear the sound of voices.

Approaching, Dick hailed them:

"Hello there! Who is it?"

"Dominion Government cruising plane, C 94," came the prompt answer. "Put out from Peace River Crossing to investigate this fire."

Two men stood beside the plane and when the boys came up plied them with questions. Had they come through the fire? Were there many cabins destroyed in the country north of there? Where were the boys going?

Sandy and Dick gave them what information they could, in turn asking many questions of their own. Then Dick stated their errand:

"We've been sent out by Inspector Cameron to meet a relief party, which is bringing help to the people suffering from smallpox in the remote districts north of the Mackenzie. The situation is very serious. Hundreds have already died from the disease and probably hundreds more will before assistance can arrive."

Horace Alderby, one of the aviators, spoke up quickly:

"Queer we didn't hear anything about it when

we left the Crossing. I should think that if Inspector Cameron had wired to Edmonton the people at Peace River——"

"But look here, Horace," interrupted the other, "have you forgotten that the wires are down as a result of this fire?"

"Why, yes, Randall, so I have," laughed Alderby. "The line is clear from Peace River Crossing to Edmonton, but north the service has been disrupted. It is quite likely," turning to the boys, "that your Inspector Cameron has not been able to get in touch with Edmonton at all."

"That's too bad," said Dick. "It makes it all the more important why we should hurry on and send in the news from Peace River Crossing. Our plan is to go over to Fort Vermilion and from there try to secure a ride up the Peace in a steam or motor boat."

"That's a good three days' trip," stated Alderby. "It's fortunate we ran across you."

"Why?" Sandy asked innocently.

"Because," the aviator replied, "we can take you over there ourselves just as soon as we look over our motor."

"Did motor trouble force you to land?" Dick inquired.

"Yes, but it's nothing serious. We'll have it ready in a jiffy."

"Trouble is," said Randall, "there's room only for one of you."

This statement immediately relieved Toma's mind. He had begun to fear that he would be asked to sail through the sky in the bowels of that awesome monster—an invitation he had firmly decided to decline.

"That's all right me, Dick. Mebbe you or Sandy go, but I like stay here with the ponies."

"Dick will have to go, of course," Sandy stated, experiencing a moment or two of regret as he looked at the plane and thought of the thrilling ride through the clouds. "As Toma just said, he and I can remain here with the ponies. We'll make camp and wait for your return."

"Good heavens, you can't do that!" Dick expostulated. "You'll be in danger here with the fire so close. You never can tell when the wind may change and blow it this way."

"But we no stay here," Toma enlightened him. "We go on to Fort Vermilion. You come back that way."

It seemed a good arrangement and soon afterward Dick climbed aboard, crouching down in the limited space assigned to him. He felt a little nervous now that they were about to start. At the first crackling roar of the powerful motor, his heart leaped up in his throat. He called out something unintelligible to

Sandy and Toma, grabbed for his hat as the plane commenced bounding along the uneven ground, then stole one frightened look over the side just as the earth commenced to drop away from him in a manner that was both sickening and disconcerting. Nearly ten minutes had passed before he had recovered sufficiently from the shock to realize that he had actually started out on his first journey through the air.

"How do you like it?" asked Randall.

"Do-o-n't kn-n-ow yet," he managed to articulate. "How long are we going to be up here?"

"Just a few hours,"—reassuringly.

Just a few hours! Saints and martyrs! Could he stand it that long? When minutes were terrible, what would hours be like? Instantly he dismissed what remained of a once overpowering ambition to become an aviator. It wasn't exactly in his line anyway. He lacked the necessary physical qualifications. He hadn't realized it before, not until now, but his stomach was weak. It felt as if there was a big hole there, through which a current of cold air passed every few seconds at a terrific rate of speed. It made him almost ill.

In an effort to keep his thoughts in more comfortable channels, he addressed himself to Randall:

"You said this was a government plane?"

"Yes," came the ready answer, "one of five sent out to this north country to assist in the prevention and control of forest fires. The country will need all this valuable timber some day. Millions of dollars going up in smoke. Time we put a stop to it."

Randall's voice trailed off and became lost in the roar of the motor and the screeching of the wind. Dick tried to stretch his legs. He tried to sleep. He endeavored to accustom himself to the queer, unpleasant motion of the plane. He was unutterably glad when he heard Alderby trumpeting in Randall's ear:

"Crossing lights!"

Dick steeled himself and looked down. Ahead and far below he perceived a faint effulgence—like glowworms shining feebly across a vale of darkness.

Not long afterward they began to descend. Hills took shape. The wide ribbon of the Peace and the Hart, cascading down through the hills to join it. The shape of trees, the rugged contours of the land and, finally, straight below them, a level field, which seemed to come up, up, up to meet them, and upon which, a short time later, they landed in safety.

"Here!" exclaimed the jovial voice of Alderby.

In the chill, gray light of dawn, Dick followed Randall past the hangar and into the town. His heart was beating jubilantly.

His companion led the way through the streets of the little town, pausing at length in front of a small brick building, which served as an office for the government telegraph. The door was locked, but following a short rattling at the knob, they were admitted by a sleepy operator, who demanded to know their business.

In a few words, Randall explained the reason for their early call.

"We would like to know," he continued, "if you have any information concerning a smallpox epidemic in the north, or of a relief party which has been sent out from Edmonton?"

"Yes, I know something about it."

The operator invited them inside and switched on the lights. He in turn asked a question of Randall:

"Is this one of the young men Cameron instructed to come here to meet the relief party?"

Before Randall could answer, Dick produced the letter he had received from the Indian messenger and handed it over.

"That will serve as my introduction. Read it."

"Fine!" exclaimed the operator, glancing over the missive. "Yes, Cameron got his message through. The relief expedition is already on its way."

"But I thought the government line was out of order, had been destroyed by the fire north of here."

"So it was. Inspector Cameron's s. o. s. was broadcast by radio from Mackenzie River and someone in Edmonton picked it up. The message was repeated again early this morning. It's common property now all over the province. Every available airplane in Edmonton and Calgary is being sent up. A few of the planes ought to arrive any time. Also a special passenger train is scheduled to arrive tonight."

"Can the airplanes go as far north as the Mackenzie?" Dick asked.

Randall replied in the affirmative. "The only difficulty is to carry enough gasoline."

"In that case," said Dick, a little crestfallen, "our services will no longer be required."

"Don't worry. You'll have plenty to do," laughed the operator.

"Your troubles have only commenced," smiled Randall. "I'll take you back and pick up your friends at Fort Vermilion, then we'll pilot the other planes through to the Mackenzie. You'll be a regular air-hawk before long."

He turned to the operator. "Thank you very much for your kindness. I think I'll take Dick over to one of the hotels and then slip back to the flying field."

"I can't go to a hotel just yet," Dick interposed. "I was told to report to Inspector Anderson at the police barracks here."

Hardly were they in the street again, when the aviator clutched Dick's shoulder with one hand, while with the other he pointed aloft. Through the still air there came to them the distant strum, strum, strum of a motor.

"Look!" he shouted. "The first plane from Edmonton!"

CHAPTER V

MACKENZIE RIVER POST

Convalescing after a serious illness, Corporal Rand found it expedient on this bright autumnal morning to rise, don his uniform and go for a stroll along the banks of the mighty Mackenzie River. He was still very weak and shaky as a result of his long confinement at barracks hospital, yet the crisp, still air was tonic in its effect and something of his old cheerfulness and buoyancy returned as he proceeded along the narrow footpath leading away from the post.

The corporal's thoughts touched upon many subjects. Above all, was he glad to know that he would soon be able to return to duty. The tedium and monotony of what amounted almost to imprisonment would soon be at an end. Accustomed to a life of ceaseless activity, he yearned to be on the trail again. The old restlessness was in his blood. Before starting out he had paid a visit to Inspector Cameron. With a smile he recalled the interview with his chief and in retrospect, he saw himself again, standing at

attention before the grizzled and stern director of police activities in that part of the North.

"Well, how are you feeling, corporal?"

The words had been snapped out at him in the usual brisk, nervous manner, the man's steel-gray eyes carrying no hint of the real feeling behind them.

"I'm ready to report for duty, sir," he made the statement carelessly.

"Humph! Duty! You're pale as a ghost, man. Shaky! Wonder how you dare to come here with your deceptions. Back to the barracks with you and don't let me see you again until you're a well man."

Rand smiled, saluted, and half-turned to leave the room when a thought came to him.

"No objections to my taking a stroll, sir? Think the fresh air will do me good."

"Certainly," said the inspector a little crisply, then turned to his work, only to raise his eyes again as Rand walked over in the direction of the door.

"Hold. Have you heard the latest news, corporal?"—more kindly.

Rand hesitated, one hand on the knob of the door.

"No, sir, I haven't."

"Good news. Wonderful news." Cameron's eyes were sparkling now. "Most astonishing too. The relief expedition left Peace River Crossing yesterday and will be here before night. Marvelous!"

Rand wondered if he had heard aright. There was a

faint trace of incredulity in his voice as he answered:

"Marvelous, indeed, sir. Last year Sergeant Richardson made the trip in a little less than ten days. Who's leading this expedition?"

"Dick Kent," answered the other.

Corporal Rand was smiling broadly now.

"He must have sprouted a pair of wings, sir."

"That's it exactly. They're coming by airplane."

Rand recalled his astonishment at this unexpected bit of information. Amazement widened his eyes. He turned swiftly.

"Airplanes!"

"Yes. I don't understand it myself. If they make it, it will be the first time in history. The petrol supply will be their chief trouble."

"Great experience for Dick and Sandy," mused the corporal.

"I wasn't thinking about them. I was thinking about the hundreds of poor devils up north, whose lives will be spared if that flight should prove successful."

"Certainly, sir, that's true. A sort of race against death, isn't it? By the way, inspector, how is the smallpox situation now?"

"Appalling! The reports I have received stagger me. The ratio of persons who die after incurring the disease is about four out of every six. The epidemic has spread out over a very wide area. It has already

reached the Eskimo tribes on the eastern side of the barren lands. They're dying like flies."

"Do you think you'll have sufficient medicine and men for the whole of the territory affected?"

"I doubt it. Nevertheless, we'll do the best we can. If Kent and his two friends get through safely, I'm sending them up to the barrens with one physician and as much of the remedy as we can possibly spare."

. . . . . .

Corporal Rand looked out across the valley. The opposite bank of the river flamed with the gold and bronze of autumn's foliage. Though the season was getting late, the weather was glorious. Not a breath of wind. The sun shone from an unclouded, deep-azure sky. Large flocks of wild geese went honking overhead.

A little regretfully, Rand turned and retraced his steps. It would soon be time for the midday meal, and he was hungry. Tomorrow, he decided, he would see the inspector again and repeat his request. Perhaps he might be ordered out for duty. Perhaps he might be permitted to do his part in a worthy cause. In any event, once on the trail, he would soon forget his weakness, probably gain new strength, be more like his former self.

He spent the afternoon reading and loitering about, but just before sundown went outside in the

hope that he might catch sight of the planes of the relief expedition. In this, however, he was disappointed, although he scanned the southern skies until long after twilight. He returned to the barracks troubled by a strange premonition. He tried to read, but threw down the book before he could become interested. He paced the rough floor of his room, puffing nervously at his pipe, his mind filled with a hundred vague alarms.

Reason, finally, came to his rescue. How foolish he was. The party would probably arrive during the night. His senseless worrying, no doubt, was caused by his recent illness and the nervous tension of being confined to the barracks. Shortly after midnight, when Constable Whitehall, the orderly, entered his room to wish him good-night, he had regained a great deal of his previous cheerfulness.

"Well, how are things?" he inquired of his visitor.

"All right, I guess, but the old man's worrying about that expedition. Says it should have been here before this."

"I've been worrying, too," Rand admitted. "Do you suppose anything has gone wrong, Whitehall?"

The constable wagged his head.

"Couldn't say. Personally, I think they'll be in before morning."

"Rather difficult to make a landing in the dark, wouldn't it?"

"Don't know about that."

"I'm afraid it would," the corporal answered his own question. "Beastly dark night. Like the inside of a pocket. You don't suppose they've been driven off their course or have lost their way?"

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Whitehall. "You're as fidgety as the chief himself. Everything will be all right, I'm sure. My advice to you is to hop into bed. This sort of thing isn't good for you."

For a long time after the two friends separated, Rand rolled and tossed in his bed, obsessed by that queer and unexplainable premonition. He fell into a sleep which was fitful and broken. Through his dreams ran a thread of horror. He woke repeatedly. Finally, he threw back the covers, rose and lit the oil lamp which stood on a table near the head of his bed, and once more essayed to read. Impatiently, he threw the book from him, darted to his feet and commenced pacing back and forth, now and again pausing to pull aside the curtain and look out.

Daylight found him shaved, fully dressed, waiting for the stir of life about the barracks. The rattle of a granite plate in the kitchen at the back came as a signal for his release from the trying ordeal of the night. He pulled on his short fur coat and walked outside, wandering listlessly away in the direction of the stables and dog compound. To his surprise, he perceived that another person was already abroad.

Approaching closer, his astonishment increased. Inspector Cameron!—a somewhat ludicrous figure that morning: Head bent, jaws clamped over a cigar, arms behind his back. He shambled to within a few feet of Rand before he looked up.

"Well?"

"Yes, sir."

"What are you doing here?"—fiercely.

"I couldn't sleep, sir."

"Neither could I. Rotten luck! What do you suppose became of them?"

"You mean the planes, sir?"

"Certainly."

"They—they ought to be in this morning," Rand stammered.

"They should have been in last night."

For a time they lapsed into silence, each regarding the other intently. Finally the corporal plucked up enough courage to make his request:

"If you've no objections, inspector, I'd like to return to duty."

Cameron glared at him.

"I'm really all right," Rand hastened to inform him.

"I told you——" began the inspector, throwing away his cigar and staring fiercely at his subordinate. "I told you——"

"Yes; yes, I know," said Rand softly. "But it's

this way, sir. There is much that I can do to help out at this critical time. A few days in the open air and I'll be perfectly well again."

"I'll think about it. Lord knows we need you. I may possibly be compelled to go out myself. Report to me this afternoon at two o'clock."

They separated, each going his own way. After breakfast, Rand secured his gun and went out in the vicinity of the post to hunt geese. When he returned, it was well past the lunch hour and when he had eaten it was almost time for his interview with Cameron.

When he had arrived there, the inspector's office was a scene of unusual activity. Four stalwart half-breeds stood in front of Cameron's desk, and the orderly directly behind them. The room was sticky and hot. Cameron's hair was rumpled and he was issuing orders in crisp, choppy tones.

"You have your instructions," Rand heard him state. "Now take your ponies and go out and see what you can do. Search the country carefully and make inquiries wherever you can. I'll expect you back in two days."

The natives went out of the room, followed by the orderly, then Rand, seeing his chance, walked up in front of the inspector's desk. Cameron did not even look up as he made a notation on a pad in front of him.

"All right, corporal, I have a job for you. Proceed at once to Keechewan with your horse and full equipment. Know where that is, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," the corporal saluted. "Just south of the barren lands. What's the trouble up there?"

"I'm coming to that. Natives causing no end of trouble at the Keechewan mission. It's an outgrowth of this smallpox trouble. The Indians seem to think that the plague has been sent among them by the gods of the white man. The missionaries have warded off two attacks by the infuriated inhabitants of the Indian village, just south of Keechewan. Your duty, corporal, will be to straighten this thing up. Endeavor to instil a friendly feeling among the Indians. If any lives have been taken, bring in the murderers."

If Corporal Rand manifested any sign of the fear that was in his heart, it was not noticeable to his chief. He merely saluted and inquired:

"Any further instructions, sir?"

Cameron rose to his feet, strode around his desk, and, to the corporal's surprise, placed a trembling hand upon his arm.

"You don't know how I hate to do this, Rand. I don't want to send you up there without first having you inoculated. You may be going to your death—I'll be perfectly frank with you. I wish there was

some other way. I've thought long and carefully over this matter and I've come to the conclusion that unless we send help to the mission at once, it may be too late. All of them may be murdered."

"It's all right, sir. I'll go."

Cameron seized the other's hand and held it during an interval of oppressive silence. There was no thought now of the inequality of rank. Man to man, brothers in a common cause—each understood and appreciated the other's attitude and feelings.

"Thank you, sir," said Rand, "for letting me go, permitting me to do this thing."

He walked out of the post with a queer smile on his lips. He hurried away in the direction of the stables, his heart beating exultantly. His hand still tingled from Cameron's steel-like yet affectionate clasp. Dazedly, he groomed and saddled his horse and was in the very act of leading it outside, when Whitehall appeared at the stable door.

"Drop everything at once and come back to the office. Cameron wants to see you."

Rand threw the reins over his horse's head, and followed the orderly back to barracks. Again he stood in front of his chief.

"You wish to see me?"

"Rand, I've changed my mind. I've decided not to send you after all."

Rand gulped.

"Don't change your mind on my account. I'm willing to go."

"Tut! Tut! I'm in command here. You'll do as I say. I want you to take charge during my absence. I've already written a few instructions for you."

"Will you be away long, sir?" Rand asked tremblingly, a vague suspicion in his mind.

"Several weeks, I expect. I'm going to Keechewan in your place."

"In my place!" A sudden blinding weakness overcame the corporal. "In—in my place!" he stammered.

For a period of at least five minutes the room was as quiet as death. Then, suddenly, Rand's voice rang out clearly:

"Inspector Cameron, you're a man! But I am too. My horse is saddled and waiting for me. I hate to disobey you, sir, but I'm leaving at once. When I return from the Barrens—if I ever do—I'll report here and you can place me under arrest. Good-bye, sir!"

He saluted briskly and turned away. Inspector Cameron was still gaping when the door closed softly after the retreating figure.

CHAPTER VI

SHIPS FROM THE STARS

A WONDERFUL huntsman was Kantisepa, the very greatest among his people. In his aimless journeying he had passed over a large part of the vast, immutable north, proceeding far from known haunts into lands which seldom had heard the footfalls of the hunter. He had viewed wild scenes, the glory and grandeur of which few other eyes had seen. Unnamed rivers and lakes, lofty mountains, interminable swamps, places so barren and devoid of all vegetation, so breathless, weird and forlorn that life passed on in horror, fearful of the madness that lurked there—all these he had looked upon during his ceaseless pilgrimages.

He had hunted moose and caribou and the ferocious black bears of the mountains. Once he had fought off a wolf with no better weapon than a club. His long association with the wild and its denizens had bred in him a certain uncanny wisdom. Insects and beasts and birds—he knew them all with the unerring certainty of a trained naturalist. Yet now,

standing in the bright glare of the sun, gaze focused on certain huge dark specks in the distant horizon, it was evident from his expression that at last he had seen something he could not classify.

Two birds of mammoth, gigantic size were flying straight towards him. Larger than a moose or bear, of greater size even than the largest tepee, they sailed through the air, drumming as they went. Their speed and size and the horrible noise they made so frightened poor Kantisepa, that he crouched low in a thicket, resolving under no circumstances to show himself to the invaders.

Two of the huge birds flew close together—evidently for companionship. The third one, probably much younger—for it was smaller—brought up the rear, at a considerable distance behind its mates. As this bird drew close to the clearing, an incredible thing happened. It fluttered suddenly and began to fall. It came down, spinning, righted itself, coasted along for quite a distance, as if planning to alight, then lost control of its equilibrium entirely and crashed to the ground with such a sickening thud that Kantisepa was quite sure that it was destroyed utterly.

The two other birds were almost out of sight when the catastrophe occurred. These, Kantisepa considered, must be the parent birds, and in their eagerness to reach their destination, had probably

forgotten their offspring, which was probably just learning to fly. At any rate, though the Indian stood a long time waiting, the others did not return and, finally, overcome by the natural curiosity of his race, he set out in the direction of the luckless victim.

When he had approached to within a few hundred yards of his objective, he was startled almost out of his senses. Crawling out of the mass of broken wings and fragments of the bird's body, came a curious animal, which in many respects resembled a man. A very marked difference between the creature and a man was the enormous size of the creature's eyes—three or four times larger than the eyes of his own people—composed of some peculiar substance which glinted and sparkled under the bright reflection of the sun. Then Kantisepa noted another peculiarity: Although possessing legs almost identical to his own, this strange being did not stand upon them in the ordinary manner, but chose instead to walk on both arms and legs, as a bear sometimes walks. Of a very ready and open mind, Kantisepa could explain the creature's presence in only one way: a parasite of some kind, possessing the same relationship to the bird as a flea would to a dog.

Coming still closer, he was forced to readjust his first impressions. He knew wood and iron when he saw it. He gasped in wonderment. No bird at all! Instead a magic ship, a marvelous creation, invested

with the strange power of sailing through the air. It, together with the two others, had come from some remote land beyond the stars. Trembling in every limb, he approached the strange being, who had crawled away from the wreckage of the ship. The creature was grievously hurt. Blood trickled on the ground beneath him. He had abandoned his efforts to crawl away and now lay perfectly still, his shoulders heaving in distress and pain.

Not without pity, Kantisepa shuddered at the sorry sight. With a slight grimace, he turned and walked over to examine the magic ship. Peering down within the center of the wreckage, he saw the form of another creature, identical to the first except that this one was hopelessly crushed and apparently quite dead. He withdrew his gaze quickly and turned back again to the first being, who still retained some signs of life.

Kantisepa quickly decided upon a course of action. He walked forward, stooped down and picked up the man from beyond the stars and started off in the direction of the village. He would take him to the chief medicine man, who, if he could not actually save the creature's life, could at least place him on exhibition for the benefit of his curious kinsmen.

The village was a good six miles away, but the stalwart Indian on previous occasions had carried

heavier burdens. He would proceed half way to his destination that night and the remainder on the following morning. He was forced to move slowly and to rest often. The hours passed. Finally the sun slid down to a far corner of the world until only a dazzling sector of light remained. Kantisepa made camp just as night dropped its curtain of dusk over the earth. Near at hand, he could hear the murmur of a tiny stream, above which a mist arose, spreading out gradually like a gray protecting shroud above the natural willow hedges fringing the stream. Presently, the dew wet the grass. With a mournful, unearthly cry, a night bird swooped down to the place where Kantisepa stood, rising again on whirring wings to the dark vault of the sky.

"It is an ill omen," he thought, a sudden fear gripping his heart.

And so through the brooding, interminable hours he had remained awake. First he had bathed and dressed the wounds of the strange being, then, wrapping him in his own blanket to shut out the damp cool air, he had kept silent vigil. Time crept on, its movements so slow and wearied that it seemed to him that day would never come. The tense silence oppressed him. It throbbed in his ears until the reaction of any slight sound smote sharply upon him.

Morning came at last, heralded by flaming colors in the east, preceded by a fitful breeze that stirred

the dry grass uneasily at his feet. Kantisepa was very tired. His body was stiff and sore. When he picked up the strange being again to resume his journey, his legs trembled, scarcely supporting him.

Late that morning he stumbled into the Indian encampment. Like many brown inverted cones were the dwellings that stood row on row within a narrow, peaceful valley. Through the center of the village trickled a brook, which was fed from numerous small springs bubbling up between broken rocks.

The place slept in a glare of brilliant sunlight. Dogs lay curled up in the shade of the tepees. Children played listlessly in the dead grass or waded knee-deep in the riffles of the brook. Here and there Kantisepa discerned the squat indolent forms of women and, farther on, standing at the extreme end of a willow copse, a single solitary hunter.

Suddenly the village came out of its picturesque somnolence. A dog barked unexpectedly near at hand. Magically, the plain became dotted with a scurrying throng. Men, women and children tumbled forth from drab tepees. Sharp cries arose. Led by the most nimble of foot, the entire populace raced forward to meet the returning hunter. Soon he was completely surrounded. Inquisitive eyes peered down at the strange being. Kantisepa was forced to put down his burden and immediately a babble of voices arose, continuing until a tall, gaudily-apparelled war-

rior pushed his way through to the spot and waved one arm peremptorily.

"Who is this you have brought among us?" he demanded.

"A strange god from the skies," Kantisepa answered proudly. "He came on a ship which sailed through the clouds, but which met with disaster."

"Are you sure he will not bring a curse upon us?" inquired the old warrior.

Kantisepa wiped the perspiration from his face.

"He is without friends and without people," he asserted. "A number of his comrades in other magic ships of the air saw him fall but did not come to his rescue."

The chief stooped down and examined the partially conscious figure.

"He is a young man—a mere stripling youth. Did he travel alone?"

Kantisepa shook his head.

"No, there was one other with him, who now is dead."

With a wave of his arm, the chief dismissed the jostling crowd and turned again to the hunter.

"You have done well," he complimented him. "Raise him up and bring him to my tepee."

Morning had passed. South the sun swept through blue unclouded skies. Together Kantisepa and the chief went forward through a lane of curious natives.

"This being is hurt and cannot return to his people," said Kantisepa. "His wonder ship of the air became demolished when it fell from the clouds."

They entered the tepee where Kantisepa deposited his burden gently on a soft rabbit-robe, then rose with a weary gesture and turned again to the headman of his tribe.

"It is a strange story," he declared. "Yet it is true. If you will summon the chief men of the village, this afternoon I will lead you and them to the magic ship."

CHAPTER VII

RETURNING MEMORY

When Dick sat up he saw the walls of a tepee, the tall form of an Indian of doubtful age, dressed in beaded moosehide, and the shadow of still another figure on his right and a little behind him. Kantisepa's ministering effort had not been in vain. The strange being had recovered consciousness!

As Dick's mind grew clearer, memory came back to him. He recalled the flight through the air from Peace River Crossing. As far as Fort Vermilion he had travelled with Randall, but there had given up his place to Sandy and Toma, he himself entering the plane which was being piloted by Cliff Stewart, a member of the Edmonton relief expedition.

From that very moment their trouble had started. In "taking-off" Stewart had slightly injured his machine in a collision with a tree. Later there had been trouble with the motor. Two hundred miles north of Fort Vermilion, a few minutes before the final tragedy, Dick had heard a sudden crackling

noise and had seen Stewart's face turn pale as he had reached for the controlling levers.

Dick shuddered at the memory of that fall from the skies when the plane became unmanageable. A terrifying spinning sensation, a horrible rush of air from below, the cracking and splitting of wood and steel, culminating in a terrific descent and the lapse of consciousness.

How he had contrived to escape with his life seemed more than a miracle. Had Stewart been equally as fortunate? Who had brought him here? He looked up into the expressionless eyes of the old Indian who stood opposite.

"Where am I?" he asked in Cree.

The old chief started. Here indeed was undeniable evidence of the divinity of this strange being. He was a god surely. Did he not speak the language of their tribe, this stranger who had come from some shadowy land beyond the moon?

"Glorious one, do not fear. You are safe among friends. I give you my assurance and the assurance of all my people. We are deeply honored by your coming."

"But who brought me here?"

"I did," the man beside him spoke up unhesitatingly. "When the magic ship crashed to the earth, I bore you here in my own arms."

"And my companion?" trembled Dick.

"He is dead."

For a moment the young man could not speak. Something choked him. The memory of the valiant pilot was a particularly poignant one. In one sense of the word, Stewart had become a martyr in a noble cause. Like many another fearless flyer he had engraved his name in blood on the flaming altar of achievement. It was several minutes before Dick could trust himself to speak.

"Did the other ships come back to our rescue?"

"No," answered Kantisepa, "they sailed on through the heavens and became lost in the mists of a distant country."

It was strange, thought Dick. Queer the others had not seen their fall. But surely by this time they had discovered the absence of the third plane and would come back to investigate.

"How long has it been since we fell to the ground?" Dick inquired of Kantisepa.

"Late yesterday afternoon. This is another day."

Dick's heart sank at the information. He had supposed that only a few hours had passed since the accident.

"And you saw no sign of the ships returning?" he persisted. "Are you sure?"

Kantisepa shook his head.

"I am sure, my brother. Even if I had not seen them, had they returned, my ears would have caught

the sound of their coming. Perhaps they have gone back to the land of your people, the place beyond the stars."

For the next ten or fifteen minutes the young adventurer attempted to make his two companions, credulous and highly imaginative Indians, understand that there was nothing in any way magical or mysterious about those ships of the air; and that neither he nor his friends were gods from some vague land beyond the rim of the world, but flesh and blood men like themselves, men who had come from Edmonton to bring help and relief to hundreds of their kinsmen suffering from the plague.

Both Kantisepa and the chief had heard of the existence of the big city to the south, and the name "Edmonton" was not unfamiliar to them. But neither had ever heard, or if they had heard would have believed that ordinary mortals, even the smartest of the white race, could fashion boats from wood and iron that could float through thin air. Finally, however, when Dick had nearly exhausted his patience and his vocabulary, he saw that in a measure, at least, they had begun to credit his story.

"It is very wonderful," said the chief, "that men are now able to go floating through the skies. But tell me, my brother, have not certain of the braver ones already journeyed to the stars?"

"No," answered Dick. "Thus far no boat has

ever been built which would be strong enough to undertake such a voyage. Perhaps that will come in time."

An interval of silence ensued, broken at length by the appearance of an Indian squaw, who brought food and drink and placed it before the young man. Then, while Dick ate, he talked. He told them of the smallpox epidemic north of the Mackenzie, of his adventures in going to Peace River Crossing at the request of Inspector Cameron of the mounted police, and subsequently of his ill-fated ride from Fort Vermilion.

"Those ships of the air," he concluded, "are carrying medicine to the sick."

The two Indians appeared to be very much interested, offering their services in any way that would be useful in such a cause. The chief said:

"We will give you ponies so that you may proceed on your journey."

Dick thanked them. "That is very kind of you."

He looked up with beaming eyes, then abruptly his face darkened as a thought occurred to him.

"I must take the body of my friend with me," he trembled. "I must start today. The great white father of the police will be pleased to hear of your kindness. Perhaps some of your people will be so good as to accompany me on my journey."

The chief advanced and laid a hand benevolently

on the young man's head. Something closely akin to a smile lighted the wrinkled, weatherbeaten face.

"I myself," he announced proudly, "will lead the expedition which will set out this afternoon for the Mackenzie River. It is said."

And with a stiff, formal bow, he turned with great dignity and strode out of the tepee.

A few minutes later Dick rose and followed Kantisepa outside. They proceeded to a far end of the village, where a poplar pole corral had been built. This corral or compound contained between thirty or forty Indian ponies. A number of youths had already entered it, carrying lassos. Following much shouting and stampeding of hoofs, they soon had a number of the little beasts saddled and bridled in preparation for the journey northward.

Kantisepa and Dick stood near the entrance of the corral, conversing in low tones. It was during this conversation that Dick learned for the first time that the place where the plane had crashed to the ground was not close to the village. This information had come as a result of his request that he be taken to the spot.

"Come," he said to his Indian friend, "we will walk over there while the young men are packing the ponies."

Kantisepa stared at the other in mild disapproval.

"Why do you wish to go now?" he asked. "It is far to walk."

"How far is it?" asked Dick.

"Six miles," came the astonishing reply. "Very soon we will go that way. The magic ship lies broken in a little meadow that lies straight in the direction of the noonday sun."

"And you carried me here all that way?" Dick asked in amazement.

"Yes, it is so," Kantisepa answered, the tone of his voice implying that the achievement was scarcely worthy of mention.

Dick looked at the stalwart Indian with something very much like a lump in his throat. He could see it all plainly now: The shattered airplane, himself crawling dazedly from the wreckage, only to sink unconscious in a place where eventually he would have died, had not this dusky friend come to his rescue. Impulsively he stepped forward and imprisoned one of Kantisepa's long, thin hands in his own.

"My brother," his voice quavered, "I have very much to thank you for, and never shall I forget your kindness."

Not long afterward a young Indian led a pony over to where Dick and Kantisepa stood and indicated with a gesture that the beast belonged to

Dick. Immediately behind, came another youth with a mount for Kantisepa. Soon the cavalcade was formed. At two o'clock they rode forth in the bright glare of October sunshine.

As they went forward in the direction of the little meadow, Dick was conscious of many mixed emotions. He was glad that they had started out on the trek to Mackenzie River, yet the thought of approaching the shattered airplane and taking Stewart's crushed body north for burial filled him with many unhappy thoughts.

On they went through the beauty of a perfect Indian Summer. The earth was languorous and quiet, wrapped in a blue haze, made resplendent by the varicolored autumn foliage. Kantisepa, who was riding close beside Dick, presently raised one arm and pointed ahead to where the trees thinned out to form a natural meadow.

"We will be there soon," he announced.

Dick looked, then turned his head away. He hated the coming ordeal. With difficulty, he steeled himself for the trying experience of approaching the battered plane and removing Stewart from the wreckage. In his weakened, nervous state, he felt unequal to the task. He rode forward, eyes on the ground, feeling sick and unhappy.

They pushed their way to the edge of the meadow, when, suddenly as if by a common impulse, the

cavalcade checked itself and a low murmer of excitement, mixed with fear, ran along its entire length.

Dick supposed that the sight of the broken plane had been the cause of the momentary delay. However, when he looked up, he too became excited. A surge of happiness welled up in him. He leaned over dazedly and grasped the pommel of his saddle.

Straight ahead, not far from the ruins of the craft in which he had nearly been killed, stood two gray airplanes, graceful as birds. They had come back to rescue him.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TOLL OF THE NORTH

Corporal Rand's bloodshot eyes watched the bannock baking before the fire. It was a small bannock, as bannocks go—a few ounces of flour, water and salt, simmering and bubbling there in the bottom of the frying pan. Unsupported by as much as a single pinch of baking powder, this culinary effort of Rand's wore an appearance of deep and utter dejection. Either as a work of art or as an achievement in cookery the thing was a failure—an unsavory, unappetizing mess. Yet the corporal regarded it with elation in his heart. His mouth watered and his stomach did an acrobatic flip-flop of happy anticipation. It was a wonderful moment for Rand.

Half-starved, almost worn to the bone, in his desperate effort to make Keechewan Mission before the final freeze-up, the young policeman was in dire straits. For several days now he had subsisted chiefly on the dry and withered berries of saskatoon, with an occasional small morsel of bird meat. For hundreds of miles he had trekked along in worn

moccasins, flapping miserably about his ankles, the bare soles of his feet pattering monotonously over a rough, difficult, uncertain trail.

Since leaving Mackenzie River barracks one disaster had followed another. First, he had lost his horse and rifle in attempting to ford a difficult river. Three days later, while he slept, there had come in the night a soft-footed Indian prowler who had, without compunction, stolen his only pair of service boots, his shoulder-pack and his revolver.

He had been placed in a terrible predicament. Barefooted, hungry, an unabating rage in his heart, he had struggled on for a distance of nearly twenty miles before luck favored him to the extent of directing him to an Indian encampment, where he ate his first full meal in many days and where, after many threats and much patient dickering, he had been able to purchase a pair of moosehide moccasins.

A few days following this fortunate meeting, he had been reduced almost to his previous condition of want and suffering. Then the tables had turned again. Not more than an hour ago a great good fortune had befallen him.

He had come down into a little valley between two hills; hobbling down on tortured feet to a sizeable grove of poplar and jack-pine. Half-cursing, half-moaning to himself, he had crossed a low ravine, then scrambled up in the mellow afternoon sunlight

to the edge of a small natural clearing. His incurious gaze swept the view before him. For a moment he paused, leaning somewhat dizzily against a small sapling before continuing his course southward to the Wapiti River, where he had planned to camp for the night.

In the short space of time in which he stood there, shaking with fatigue, there impressed itself presently upon his vision an object of unusual interest. It was the small stump of a tree—an ancient, weather-beaten stump, probably not more than eight or ten inches in diameter. As Rand looked at it, a half-hearted wonderment stole over him, then a sudden quickening of the heart. Here before him was a man-made stump, the first he had seen in the last two hundred miles of steady travelling through the wilderness.

Someone, perhaps a long time ago, had felled a tree here. The corporal could easily make out the imprint of an ax. And looking farther he had found other stumps, upon which trees had once rested—about thirty of them in all—standing there old and rotten at the heart, like so many dreary sentinels in an unsightly garden of desolation.

Suddenly Rand gave vent to a sharp, quick cry of excitement. In spite of the fact that his feet hurt him almost beyond endurance, he went forward at a run, racing over the thick dry grass. The trees had

been cut down for a purpose, as he had surmised. He could see the cabin now, faintly showing through the screen of underbrush on the opposite side of the clearing.

But his heart fell as he came closer to the cabin. A sickening wave of disgust and disappointment swept over him. He could see plainly that no one lived there. The door, partially open, hung loosely on broken hinges, while across the threshold, the grass had woven a tangled mat which encroached a full twelve inches into the dark interior.

Years had passed probably since a human foot had stepped within that cabin. In its present untenanted, dilapidated state it had very little to offer to a man whose stomach gnawed with the irrepressible pangs of hunger. In a fit of sudden despair, he stood and regarded it darkly.

Nevertheless, he strode through the doorway, for no apparent reason that he could imagine, unless it was to satisfy a somewhat morbid curiosity as to what he would find within. In the dim light of the single room, he moved cautiously forward, peering about him with half-frightened eyes. His feet stirred up a choking dust. There was a smell about the place he did not like. It rose to his nostrils—a faintly sickening odor of decayed plants.

A crudely constructed cupboard at one side of the room attracted his attention. He walked over and

examined it. The lower shelf contained nothing of interest: a few black, dirty pots, covered with rust. On the second shelf there was a miscellaneous assortment of knives and forks, a small hammer with one of the claws broken, two enamelled plates, chipped badly, but otherwise in fair condition.

The policeman found it necessary to rise on tiptoes in order to reach the third shelf at all; but after a good deal of fumbling and groping about, his hand came in contact with a round object, which he lifted down for better inspection.

The weight of the thing, about six or seven pounds, indicated that it was not entirely empty. It was round and cylindrical in shape and was fitted on the top with an air-tight cover. Rand's face became damp with moisture as he turned the vessel slowly around in his hands. He shook it several times, listening to the dull thud inside. Then, with a quick in-taking of breath, he placed it hurriedly on the floor and attempted to pry off the lid.

Several minutes later—for the cover was rusted down—he straightened up, gibbering inanely. His eyes were bright with the joy of his discovery. He laughed loudly, gleefully—a hint of madness in his laugh. He stooped forward again, ramming one hand into the cool, white substance. For one delicious moment he pawed around in it.

"Flour! Flour!" he gloated. "This is lucky!"

And so he ate the bannock with thankfulness in his heart. He had used very little of the flour. With careful rationing, it would still last him a long time —perhaps even to Keechewan Mission.

He sat now, staring into the fire, vaguely wondering what the morrow would bring forth. He was in a much happier frame of mind than he had been for many days. Things looked brighter somehow—after that bannock. In the morning he would build a raft and cross the Wapiti. After that there would be fairly smooth and open country until he came to the Little Moose. More trouble there. A day or two crossing the divide—then Keechewan Mission less than thirty miles away.

A short time later, Rand stirred himself and hobbled down to the river. He would bathe his aching feet in ice-cold water before turning in. They were in terrible condition and required immediate attention. If only he could get the pain and fever out of them. Tomorrow morning he would tear up his shirt and make soft cushions to wear inside his moccasins.

For several minutes he sat, dangling his feet in the glistening, gurgling flood of the turbulent Wapiti. It was so dark now that he could scarcely see. It was chilly sitting there on the rock with a north wind whipping across his face and the water, like ice, around his ankles. Much as he hated to admit it, the

weather was not promising. In fact, there was an indefinable something in the air, a vague, mysterious portent that caused him to shiver with apprehension.

Suddenly, above the sound of the river and the moaning of the wind, startled and alert, Rand heard a splashing out in mid-stream. A moose or caribou, was his first thought. Too bad he didn't have a gun. In his half-famished state a moose-steak now would be his salvation.

A human voice carried across the water. Another voice. Rand could not credit his senses. He rose, forgetting about his bare feet, and strained his eyes until they hurt in the hope that he might be able to see something. He was all atremble. It was dark out there, dark as black midnight. The water rippled and the wind moaned in the pines. Surely he was mistaken about those voices. He couldn't hear a thing now—not even a splash.

"Pull out! You're gettin' too close tuh shore," warned a voice, deep and resonant.

There was no mistaking it this time. Rand's heart leaped. In the tremendous excitement of the moment he forgot himself completely. Like one daft, he sprang from the rock and raced wildly along the shore, cutting his already bruised and battered feet. He screeched at the top of his voice—one long and prolonged screech that shattered the silence.

"Yip! Yih!" shouted Rand, waving his arms.

"Did you hear that?"—from the river.

"Look out! Look out! You plagued fool. Look out! Now you've done it. There!——"

A frenzied splashing of oars, another warning shout—a crash! It was the crumpling impact of wood against rock that Rand heard, followed by the shrieks of two men in mortal terror. Experienced in such matters, he sensed immediately what had occurred. Sweeping down the swift, treacherous current, the boat had veered in too close to shore, had struck a rock and had overturned. The men were in the water. His fault entirely. That foolish screech——

Shouting out his encouragement, the corporal waded out into the stream and, without a moment's hesitation, dove forward and commenced swimming to their rescue.

CHAPTER IX

CAMERON FEELS THE STRAIN

THE advance guard of the Edmonton relief expedition arrived at Mackenzie River two days late. Included among its personnel were Dick Kent, Sandy and Toma and two medical men, Drs. Brady and Mattinson. Joy over the safe arrival of the party was shadowed by the news of the destruction of one of the planes and the death of Stewart, the aviator.

Inspector Cameron began at once to plan two separate itineraries into the stricken areas. One of the physicians, it was decided, would be sent immediately to the country north of the Mackenzie, from whence Davis had brought first word of the epidemic. Another party was instructed to proceed north and east toward the barren lands, over the selfsame route Corporal Rand had but recently taken.

It was while these preparations were being carried out that the three boys, Dick, Sandy and Toma, were called into the presence of the mounted police official. Caps in hand, feeling awkward and ill at ease, they

listened to the grave and somewhat impatient voice of the inspector.

"Can't tell you how pleased I am. Splendid! You've done well. Want to thank each one of you. Suppose you think you're going home now."

The assertion seemed to require an answer. Sandy twisted his cap into a knot, smiled, cleared his throat and assumed the part of spokesman.

"Yes, sir. We are under that impression."

Cameron scowled, running his fingers through his rumpled hair.

"Not a bit of it! You're not! Might as well disillusion you right now. You're to undertake another errand, equally as important and dangerous."

"What is it?" asked Dick.

"You're to lead the way to the barren lands. Escort to Doctor Brady."

The boys exchanged furtive glances. Cameron continued:

"Dick, I'm placing you in charge. You're the oldest. Sandy and Toma will be your lieutenants. This expedition must not fail. Nothing must happen to it. I'll hold you all responsible."

"Yes, sir," trembled Dick. "But how do we get there?"

"There's no trail. I'll try and find a guide for you. You proceed northeast, cross the Wapiti, the Little Moose, pass over a height of land known as 'The

Divide,' enter the barren lands and thus eventually come to the Keechewan Mission, an important Catholic missionary center. It's a hard trip and you'll never forget it."

"Are there many people at this mission?" inquired Sandy.

"Yes, there's a sort of village there—a mission-village: flour mill, schools, hospital and the like. There are always several large Indian encampments close by. The plague has found its way there. Scores have died. As far as I know, no other section of the country is in such dire straits."

The inspector paused, scowling again and for a moment seemed to have forgotten that he was not alone.

"The epidemic is bad enough," he resumed, "but to add to the horror of the situation, a revolt has taken place among the Indians. I've been compelled to send Corporal Rand up there. You will follow but I doubt if you will overtake him. He's travelling light, while you will have medicine, supplies, mail——"

"Mail!" interrupted Dick in surprise.

"Yes, mail. All of the mail for the Keechewan Mission comes here and is forwarded, usually through the efforts of the R. N. W. M. P. There will be three large sacks, including one packet of

registered letters. Are you willing to undertake this responsibility?"

The boys were a little confused and shy. For a time no one spoke.

"I asked you a question," persisted the inspector. "Do you or do you not want to take the mail?"

"Yes, sir," said Dick hurriedly, "we'll be glad to."

"All right. Then that's settled. I've given you an idea of the route. Anything you wish to know?"

"It will be necessary to supply us with sort of transport," Dick reminded him. "Would you suggest ponies?"

Inspector Cameron smiled.

"I might suggest ponies did I not know the North as well as I do. The season is growing late. It is now the last week in October. The weather has been wonderful—unusual, but we're due for a change almost any day now. You'll have to take both ponies and dogs. Just as soon as the first snowstorm comes, you can turn the ponies loose and proceed with the huskies."

A short discussion then took place. Dick could see that the inspector was very anxious to have them start as soon as possible. For the past few weeks the police head had had much to worry him. That was evident. Deep lines showed in his forehead. At

times he was subject to fits of brooding, although the safe arrival of the Edmonton party had considerably cheered him.

Burdened with so many responsibilities, Cameron revealed his state of mind from time to time, either by his expression or by some chance word he let fall. Naturally, the boys supposed that the inspector's chief worry had to do with the epidemic. They did not know that one of the things that caused the grizzled veteran of police many hours of apprehension and nights of wakeful, intolerable anxiety was Corporal Rand's hazardous undertaking. He feared for his subordinate's safety. The corporal had not been vaccinated. He had been sent to a district which festered with the plague.

"Rand has gone up ahead of you," he told the boys. "When you arrive at the mission, the first thing I want you to do is to look him up. Doctor Brady has my instructions. He'll vaccinate the corporal if—if——"

He broke off suddenly and his eyes sought his desk. Absently he picked up a letter-file and ran through it. Dick observed that his fingers were trembling.

"If it isn't too late, Dr. Brady will vaccinate him," he resumed more calmly. "The thought of his being up there troubles me. Shouldn't have gone in the first place. Matter of fact, he went against my

wishes. Hardly in physical shape. Weak. Been sick a long time with pneumonia. I don't like it."

Again the police chief became absorbed in his thoughts. The boys stood undecided, then turned and left the room. Outside, where they would not be overheard, Sandy broke forth:

"Never saw him just like that before. I'd say he's losing his grip, Dick. Acts queer, doesn't he?"

"I don't wonder at it," Dick came staunchly to the inspector's rescue. "You must admit his position has been trying enough of late. If I'd been in his place, I'd be a mental wreck by this time."

Soon after the subject was forgotten in the hurry and interest of their departure. All three had been sent to Dr. Brady and were vaccinated. At three o'clock that same afternoon the cavalcade set out. An Indian guide, who professed to know every foot of the route, had been added to their train at the last moment by Inspector Cameron.

"I'm not altogether sure about this man," he had told Dick in strict confidence. "Seems intelligent enough, and I'm sure he's been over the route many times. My only objection to him is his appearance. But one can't condemn a man on that score. He'll probably prove invaluable to you."

Dick glanced at the new recruit and pursed his lips.

"Did he volunteer for this service?" he asked.

"Yes. Seemed anxious to go. Didn't even want pay for his services. Rather unusual, isn't it?"

"Perhaps he has relatives or friends at Keechewan he's been worrying about," surmised Dick.

"Of course, that may explain it. Still, I can't say I like his looks. You'd better watch him."

"I'll be on my guard," laughed Dick as he leaned over in his saddle to shake hands. "I'll do my very best, inspector."

"I know you will. Otherwise, I wouldn't have sent you."

The grim mouth relaxed into a faint smile. Cameron reached up and gripped Dick's hand.

"Good-bye," he said simply.

CHAPTER X

THE MUTINEER

THREE days out from the mounted police detachment the weather grew suddenly cold and the first snow fell. Without preliminary warning, winter had come. It swept down from the north, a mad trumpeter blowing his blast at the head of a vengeful, icy column. On the morning of the second day after the storm six inches of snow covered the earth.

Dick's first act was to remove the packs from the ponies and place them on the dog sleighs. This task took less than an hour. With the malemute and husky teams transporting their supplies, they pushed on, discovering that, despite the cold, they now made better progress. Dick drove the mail sledge, while Sandy and Toma had charge of the team which conveyed most of the medicine, not to mention the worthy and genial Dr. Brady himself.

Brady was popular with everyone. Always in good spirits, he became known for his wit and humor. Although considerably past middle age, he had never contrived to outgrow the young man's viewpoint. He

felt like a boy again. He talked and laughed and played pranks like a boy. To him this incursion into a vast wilderness region was an experience long to be remembered. He insisted upon doing a share of the work, soon learned to drive a dog team and often took his turn in breaking trail.

For the most part, cloudy weather prevailed, with an occasional light snowfall. The country was new to Dick and he was compelled to leave the charting of their route to the guide who had joined their party just previous to their departure.

The guide's name was Martin Lamont. He was probably of French extraction, although he claimed to be a full-blood Indian. For a native, his skin was too light, his cheekbones too low, and, what was most incredible of all, his dark hair was curly. His nose was large and unsightly, while his lips were thin—thin and bloodless. A slight cast in one hawk's eye gave him a peculiar squint.

"He can't help being so murderous-looking, I don't suppose," Sandy declared one morning. "Just the same, that eye of his chills me to the bone whenever he looks my way. And did you ever notice, Dick, that horrible scar on his left cheek?"

"Yes," Dick replied, "I've noticed it. But I think I could endure his looks if only he had a more pleasant disposition. He seldom talks. When he does, it's usually a grunt or a snarl. A while ago he acted

queerly when I asked him to relieve one of the drivers, who was breaking trail."

Dr. Brady was walking right behind the two boys and evidently had been listening to their conversation, for, at this juncture, he suddenly broke forth:

"He did act queerly—only I think I'd call it defiant. There was a mutinous look in that squint eye of his."

"It was unprovoked," said Dick, a little bitterly. "I asked him in a friendly way. It's only fair that we should all take turn in breaking trail. He's the only one that seems to object."

"But what did he say?" Sandy demanded impatiently.

"Nothing," answered Dick. "Merely muttered something under his breath, glared at me, then walked back behind the last team. He's sulking there now."

"I can't understand it," Sandy wagged his head. "He volunteered his services and yet doesn't want to do his part. What would you say is wrong with him, doctor?"

"Haven't properly diagnosed his case yet," grinned Brady, "although his symptoms indicate a very serious condition. Offhand, I'd say that he required immediate treatment."

"He may get it," Dick hinted darkly.

Sandy laughed. "Places you in a kind of bad posi-

tion, doesn't it, old chap? First thing you know, you'll lose face with the rest of this outfit. That Nitchie is setting a mighty bad example."

"Exactly what I think," appended Brady. "You're in charge here, aren't you, Dick?"

"Yes," Dick nodded. "Worse luck. If it comes to a show-down of course, I'll have the police behind me. Still, I hate trouble. Sometimes I think I'll let Mr. Lamont have his own way, and again I feel that to do that will only breed discontent among the others."

Dick turned and looked up into the physician's face.

"You're older than I am, doctor. What would you suggest?"

Dr. Brady's brow puckered.

"I'm sure I don't know. I hate to advise you, my boy. You might be inclined to follow it."

"Out with it," Dick laughed. "You're putting me off. What would you do if you were in my place?"

"I don't like him," said Dr. Brady, "and I never did. I've been watching him ever since we left Mackenzie. His actions are suspicious. His disposition is unbearable. He's a hard and dirty customer. In spite of which—if I were in your place—I think I'd have it out with him. But if you do, I'm afraid there'll be trouble."

"You mean he'll fight?"

"Yes, but not openly. He isn't that type. He'll wait his chance to get even. It's hard to say what he'd do."

For a time they walked on in silence. Then Dick stepped out to one side of the trail, a grim look on his face.

"Well, we'll soon find out. I'm going back there now."

Sandy's eyes opened wide and his gaze followed his chum as he walked back to the end of the line. Brady chuckled. The driver of the team behind turned his head and grinned.

Lamont's squint eye gleamed balefully as Dick approached. Probably the man knew why Dick had come, sensed the other's motive.

"A little while ago," Dick spoke calmly, "I asked you in a nice way if you wouldn't help out in breaking trail. Why didn't you go, Martin?"

"Don' want to go," grunted the miscreant.

"Why not?"

"What you think," screeched Lamont, now in a flaming temper, "me be guide an' do all the work too? I tell him Mr. Police Inspector I go show you the way. That's all. No work! No break 'em trail! Nothing! Me big fool if I go break 'em trail like you say."

"No doubt," said Dick, endeavoring to control himself. "Just the same, I think you'll go. All day

yesterday you rode on one of the sleighs. You didn't walk a mile. Is that fair?"

"Sure," the other answered maliciously. "Me guide here. That's all I do."

"And I happen to be boss here with instructions from the man who hired you. Either you'll do your share of the work or you'll leave this party. Come now, which is it?"

"Me guide here," reiterated Lamont. "Sorry you no like it, but I no break trail."

Dick was in a quandary. He was angry, yet also was he nonplused. He had never encountered a situation like this. He wasn't quite sure how to proceed. He wished he had Brady at his side to advise him. He was treading on ticklish ground.

"All right, you'll have to leave the party, Lamont, you understand that."

Martin grinned across at him, a malevolent, maddening grin. It carried a challenge. Dick's hand fluttered toward the butt of his revolver, but he caught himself in time.

"Lamont, I'm not fooling. I mean what I say. You're leaving this party tonight when we make camp. I'll give you enough rations to take you back to the Mackenzie."

The guide's eyes narrowed to two mere slits. There was something venomous, snake-like in his stare.

"I no go back to the Mackenzie," he retorted quickly. "I go where I wish. That place I go is Keechewan Mission. How you think you stop me go there?"

"Go there, if you like, but you'll not go with us."

"Mebbe not," said Lamont stubbornly. "We see about that."

Dick left the man and hurried back to the head of the column. His face was grim and set as he rejoined Sandy and Dr. Brady. An angry flush had mounted to his cheeks. His fists were clenched so hard that the nails dug into the palms of his hands.

"Well," said Sandy, his voice lowered and anxious, "what did he say? What is he going to do?"

Dick could not trust himself to speak. Rage had overcome him.

"I'll show him! I'll show him!" the words kept singing through his brain. "I'll show him!" rang on the vengeful chant. "He'll not make a fool of me. Guide—paugh! I'll show him!"

Then, happening to glance up, he saw that Dr. Brady was looking at him—looking at him with friendly and yet appraising eyes. And in that moment he felt somehow that his measure was being taken by that genial but worldly-wise physician.

"He provoked me," said Dick by way of apology. "Lost my temper. He refuses to break trail, to work—to do anything at all except just loaf around

and point out the way to Keechewan Mission."

"And what did you say to that?"

"I told him that I didn't propose to put up with it. I said that he'd have to go. Tonight, when we make camp, I'll give him rations, send him on his way. He's through."

"I don't blame you. I think you're doing the right thing," declared Dr. Brady. "We'll be better off without him."

"I wish I could believe that," Sandy suddenly interjected. "You say we're better off without him—but are we? When he leaves us, who'll show us the way? Lamont is the only member of this party who has been to Keechewan. There's no trail. We can wander miles off our course, get ourselves into all sorts of difficulties and dangers—freeze and starve and heaven knows what. The Barrens is a horrible place in winter, a death-trap if you don't know it. My Uncle Walter has been there and he told me about it. It makes me shiver to think about it. Well named the Barren Lands. An eternity of snow and utter desolation. You simply travel on and on and on—and get nowhere. Twenty years from now some wandering Eskimo will kick your bleached skeleton out of his path."

"Can't help it," said Dick stubbornly. "That man goes."

"You're in charge here, of course. I know it's

hard to put up with his insolence and his bad example, still——"

"Yes," said Dr. Brady, who had become very much interested in Sandy's point of view, "tell us the rest of it. I'm very anxious to hear."

"There's nothing more to tell," confessed the young Scotchman. "I'm merely asking Dick to think this thing over very carefully before he comes to a decision. Even if we don't get lost without a guide, we're certain to be delayed. You know what that means?"

"Delays mean human lives. Is that it? Is that what you're thinking?"

"Yes. Inspector Cameron wants us to get through to Keechewan as quickly as possible. It's important. It's imperative. What if we do have to humor Lamont? Better to let him ride every foot of the way and lord it over us than let all those poor devils die without a chance."

"Sandy," declared Dick—and his voice caught—"you've won me over. If I dismissed Lamont now I'd—I'd have blood on my hands."

Dr. Brady did not speak for a moment. His face was grave and thoughtful.

"What do you think about it?" Dick asked.

"A peculiar situation," finally admitted Brady. "Lamont ought to be punished, of course. He's a miserable bounder, to say the least. But——"

"Sandy's logic and good sense has convinced you too."

"Exactly."

"We'll have to keep that guide no matter what happens."

"We'll have to keep him," said the doctor.

"Even if I'm compelled to apologize to him," grimaced Dick, "and cook his meals and wait on him hand and foot, we'll have to keep him."

"There's no other way. You can punish him when you get to Keechewan, of course. I'd suggest turning him over to the policeman up there, your Corporal Rand."

Silence settled down again, broken only by the cracking of whips and the sharp cries of the dog drivers. The afternoon slowly wore on. An overcast sky brought the darkness early. Yet they pushed on for nearly an hour through the gloom before Dick gave orders to halt and make camp.

"We've made a record today," exulted Sandy, as he came forward to assist Dick in unharnessing the malemutes from the mail-sledge. "We must have come nearly forty miles. With a good snow-crust, we'll do even better than that."

Dick was about to answer, when he became aware of a form emerging from the dark. A familiar voice accosted him:

"Is that you, Dick?"

"You bet! Why hello, Toma. Where's your team?"

"I get 'em off harness already. Feed 'em fish. Bye-'n'-bye they crawl in snowdrift an' go to sleep."

"Tired enough to do that myself," declared Sandy. Toma came closer. He took Dick's arm.

"You know that fellow, Lamont," he began eagerly.

"Yes, yes," said Dick. "What's he done now?"

"He tell 'em me to give you this," answered Toma, placing something in Dick's hand.

A small, flat object of some flexible material, which felt like leather. Dick fumbled in his pockets for a match and struck it. The sudden tiny glare revealed nothing more than a piece of birch bark, blank on one side, a pencilled scrawl on the other. Presently, with the help of another match, he made out two words wholly unintelligible: "god by."

"God by," asked Dick perplexedly. "What does that mean?"

"It means," answered the quick-witted Sandy in a voice that was unusually calm, "that Lamont has left us. Can't you see? Gone!"

"But this thing—these words, I mean—what——"

"He couldn't spell. It's 'good-bye.' He's gone, I tell you."

Bewildered, weary, disheartened, Dick stared miserably out into the enveloping darkness.

CHAPTER XI

PHANTOMS OF THE STORM

Long before the camp was astir on the following morning, Dick rose shivering, dressed, and made his way to Dr. Brady's tent. Lamont's departure had completely upset him. He could think of nothing else. Through the long night he had lain awake thinking unpleasant thoughts, upbraiding himself for his lack of diplomacy and negligence. To a certain extent he and he alone was responsible for the calamity. He had asked Lamont to leave the party and the guide had gone. Now he bitterly regretted the incident. He had been a fool—rash, hasty, unthinking. He had jeopardized the lives, not only of his own party, but, worse still, the lives of scores of others residing in the districts affected by the plague.

Hurrying along through the chill of early dawn, it occurred to him that there might still be some way out of the difficulty. Dr. Brady, who had not yet been informed of the guide's departure, might be able to suggest something. He entered the physician's tent and proceeded to wake its occupant.

Brady sat up, for a moment stared dully about him.

"Well! Well! So it's you, after all. When I first opened my eyes here in the darkness and felt you tugging at my arm, I was sure that my time had come. 'Indians,' I thought. 'Brady, you're about to be scalped.' Then I remembered that I am bald-headed. They couldn't scalp me but——"

"I'm in trouble, doctor," said Dick, Brady's jocularity failing to draw even a smile from him. "Lamont left us last night."

The other whistled—a habit he had when surprised or excited.

"What! You don't say!" the doctor brushed one hand hurriedly across his suddenly furrowed brow, staring straight at his informer. Then:

"So you had trouble with him after all? Was there a fight?"

"No; nothing like that. I hadn't even talked to him except that once. He left just when we made camp last night. Sent me a sort of message on a piece of birch bark. I would have given you the news before you turned in last night if Toma and I hadn't gone back on the trail to see if we couldn't find the place where he'd struck off across country."

"Strange, isn't it?" as he spoke, Brady arose, pulling a blanket around him. "Too bad! Too bad! No wonder you're worried, my boy. Did you sleep any last night?"

"Not much," admitted Dick. "You can imagine how I feel. It's all my fault. I really told him to go. It places us in a terrible position, doctor. I'm not sure whether we can find our way to Keechewan Mission or not."

"We can try," said Brady. "That, at least, is a comforting thought."

Dick removed his mittens in order to light a candle. It was very cold inside the tent. Their breath was like vapor.

"I have a plan," Dick informed the physician. "At first, when I heard that Lamont had left us, it didn't occur to me. It may be a worthless plan. I'd like your opinion on it. One reason why I came over here so early."

"What is this plan?" asked Brady.

"To send Toma out to overtake and bring the guide back."

"What! By force?"

Apparently Brady hadn't thought of that. He frowned as he began pulling on his clothes.

"Yes, if necessary, bring him back at the point of a gun. Force him to guide us whether he wants to or not."

"I'm a little in doubt as to the wisdom of that. Toma may be able to overtake Lamont and compel him to return. But what guarantee will you have that he'll guide us correctly? Don't you think that

there is the danger that in revenge he'll take us way out of our course entirely, lead us afield? That would be disastrous."

"He wouldn't dare. His life would be forfeit. I'll attend to that," said the young man grimly.

"Well, at any rate, it's worth trying. But why don't you go after him yourself, Dick? Do you think this young Indian will be as apt to find him as you will?"

"Yes, more apt to. You don't know Toma. He's a jewel. Clever tracker and all that. Courage like a panther. He'd succeed where I'd fail."

"I call that a compliment."

"It is a compliment. He's wonderful."

Brady completed dressing.

"Is there anything that I can do to help?"

"Yes, if you will. You might waken the dog mushers and see that breakfast is started while I go over and consult with Toma."

"I suppose we'll have to remain in camp here until your friend returns. The delay will be provoking but of course it can't be helped."

"I had planned to have the party go on the same as usual," said Dick. "You see, doctor, time is precious. We can't afford to lose a minute. Toma will have to take his chance. He knows the general direction in which we are travelling and can easily pick up our tracks."

Dr. Brady and Dick separated just outside the tent. The wind sent a swirl of snow about their ankles. Already a few of the malemutes could be seen emerging from their snowy dens or standing, gaunt and motionless with raised muzzles, sniffing the frosty air.

Toma was not only awake but had already left his sleeping quarters and, when Dick found him, was squatting Indian fashion in front of a roaring spruce fire, drinking a hot cup of tea. At sight of his chum, he put down the cup, his face lighting with a smile.

"You up so quick," he greeted him. "I thought mebbe I only one."

With a sidewise movement of his head, Toma indicated to Dick that he should sit down beside him.

"You drink 'em tea. Make you feel good."

"No, not now, Toma. I'll have breakfast later. I've come to see you about—about Lamont."

The quiet eyes surveyed Dick curiously.

"I thought that right away when I first see you. You no like it about Lamont run away?"

"You've struck it. I don't. But it was partly my fault that he left, Toma. I've been wondering what we'll do without a guide."

"We get along all right mebbe."

"I hate to risk it," said Dick. "I wish Lamont was here. He's lazy and worthless in lots of ways but he knows the trail. Will you go out and bring him back, Toma?"

The Indian lad blinked, stared at his chum unbelievingly. Surely he didn't mean that. Go after Lamont? Why the man wasn't worth his salt. He broke the silence with a sudden jarring laugh.

"No. I'm in earnest," Dick hastened to reassure the other. "I really want you to go, Toma. Find him and make him come back. You can take your gun. You must be very careful. While you're out there after him, we'll go on. You can follow and overtake us later."

The Indian rose deliberately to his feet. His eyes were sparkling now in his eagerness. No need to tell Dick that he would meet his wishes, would be glad of the chance for this adventure.

"And you won't be afraid?" Dick asked.

Toma grunted disdainfully, lifting his shoulders in a gesture that implied scorn at the mere suggestion.

"I start right away," he informed his friend. "Mebbe you be surprised how soon I bring him back. Him lazy fellow. Not go very far before he stop an' rest."

"That's the spirit. I know you'll succeed, Toma."

Dick rose and placed one arm affectionately about the broad shoulders, a great weight lifted from his mind.

"I be gone in a few minutes. You say good-bye Sandy."

"All right. Lots of luck, old chap. Don't get into any trouble. If I were you, I wouldn't take any chances with Lamont either. If I'm not mistaken, he's more treacherous than a wolf. You'll have to watch him."

"I be careful—don't you worry. Good-bye."

And not long afterward the young Indian stole silently forth on his dangerous errand. Expert in the use of snowshoes, he seemed to glide away, his queer shuffling motion taking him quickly across the open space to a clump of trees beyond. When Dick had joined Dr. Brady and Sandy and the little group around the campfire, he had disappeared.

"Hope he's successful," Sandy sighed, picking up another armful of wood to throw on the fire. "You've shown good judgment in sending him, Dick."

"But it's not a very pleasant morning," said Dr. Brady.

Dick glanced at the lowering sky, at the black clouds rolling up from the horizon and nodded grimly.

"Yes, that's the worst part of it, if we should

have a blizzard Toma might as well come back. He'd lose Lamont's tracks and could never find him."

"Not in a storm," agreed Sandy. "It would be almost impossible. But let's hope that that won't happen."

Yet happen it did. They were out on the trail by that time, mushing slowly along the edge of a wide ravine, their faces toward the wind, which was very sharp and penetrating. The loose snow, covering the drifts, was awhirl by now, sweeping around them. Yet this preliminary barrage was as nothing compared to the terrific onslaught that followed. A fearful darkness descended over the earth, for the light was smothered as the snow gods hurled their challenge.

Dick and his party did the only thing possible under the circumstances. They blindly sought out the nearest shelter and clung there, helpless and as impotent as babes, mere human specks in a tremendous vortex of wind and snow. Night had fallen when finally the sky cleared. Everywhere around them were mountainous drifts, battlements, peaks and even pinnacles, showing white and ghostly in the pale starlight.

As the little party straggled forth from its shelter, the earth presented an aspect of strangeness, of newness, so entirely different from its original appearance, that one could almost believe that he had been

transported in some mysterious manner to another world.

"I honestly believe," Sandy gasped, "that all the snow in the universe has been gathered together and dropped down in this one place."

"It certainly looks like it," agreed Dr. Brady, as he took a step forward and slid waist-deep into a drift. "How are we going to break trail? I certainly pity your friend Toma. Do you think it will be wise to push on until we hear from him?"

Dick shook his head despondently.

"No, we'll have to wait here. This storm is the worst thing that could have happened. Toma may not be able to rejoin us for two or three days."

"If not longer," despaired Sandy.

So, imagine their surprise and delight on the following morning to find the young man in question already amongst them. Toma sauntered up with solemn unconcern to the place where Dick and Sandy were endeavoring to build a fire. No apparition could have astonished them more. From their squatting position, they looked up and gasped, then rose in unison, howling like two maniacs. They descended upon the young Indian with a varied assortment of whoops and yells, lifted him up bodily between them and carried him triumphantly away to the tent of Dr. Brady.

"Look!" shouted Sandy. "Look what we've found."

"He's safe, doctor," screeched Dick.

The center of so much interest and enthusiasm, one would have thought that Toma himself would have caught some of the infection. Not so. With each passing moment, his face became more and more gloomy, his manner more despondent. He struggled out of Dick's and Sandy's embarrassing embrace to a more dignified position on his feet. Soberly he waved them aside.

"You think mebbe I bring back Lamont," he said bitterly. "It is not so. I no see him."

With averted eyes and shamed, flushed face, he pushed the two boys unceremoniously to one side and stalked sombrely outside.

CHAPTER XII

A HUNGRY PROWLER

For three hours Dick had been breaking trail steadily and had reached the point where his endurance was spent, where it seemed to him that to take one more step would result in physical collapse. Behind him straggled a perspiring, panting line of weary dogs and wearier men, while ahead—snow; acre upon acre, mile upon mile, interminable, never-ending—snow!

The sun of late afternoon shone brightly on the snow and made of it a vast, brilliant, sparkling field of intolerable whiteness. To gaze for any length of time into that field was impossible. The human eye wavered before that blinding radiance, could not for long meet and hold its glaring intensity. So it was that Dick looked down as he staggered on at the head of the column, and so it was that every other member of the party moved forward with bent head.

They were travelling northeast in the general direction of Keechewan Mission. Keechewan Mission was at the end of an imaginary straight line—a very

straight line—beginning at the Mackenzie River barracks. Sometimes, because of topographical obstructions—hills, ravines, dense forests, and the like—the party was forced to deviate or detour from the prescribed route. Naturally this wandering brought confusion. No one knew with any degree of certainty whether, when they came back and attempted to get on the right track again, they were a little east or a little west or directly upon that imaginary line.

It was a problem that would have absorbed the interest of a navigator or a civil engineer. To Dick, however, it was a hopeless tangle—blindly guessing at something and hoping it would come out all right. More and more he fell to consulting other members of the party, especially Toma, who had a strong sense of direction, and who had been uncannily successful in guiding Dick and Sandy on previous expeditions.

He was thinking of all this as he plodded wearily along. Perhaps even now they were off the trail and would eventually come to grief in some forbidding wasteland, far from the haunts of men.

He heard footsteps behind him and felt the weight of a hand upon his shoulder.

"What—you break trail all time. You go back now an' drive 'em my team an' ride a little while mebbe. Too hard break trail an' no stop an' rest."

It was Toma, of course. Always faithful and ob-

serving. A ready champion and trusted friend.

"It's good of you," Dick said wearily. "I am tired. My eyes hurt too. This glare is terrible."

"It very bad," agreed the young Indian. "One dog driver back there," he pointed, "him almost snow-blind."

"Glad you told me. Tonight when we make camp, I'll send him to Dr. Brady."

Dick stepped to one side to permit Toma to pass.

"Very well, then, you'll take my place. But have I been going right, Toma? Don't you think we ought to turn more to the left? I can't imagine why it is, why I feel that way, I mean, but I keep thinking that we're striking too far east."

The Indian shook his head.

"No, I guess you go about right. Mebbe it no hurt to turn little more to left."

Dick vaguely wondered.

"Why do you believe our course is about right?" he asked.

"All right," returned Toma, "I tell you. In morning an' at night when you look off that way," Toma made a sweeping motion with one arm, "you see 'em big hill. We go towards that. We keep hill in front of us. If we go wrong on trail, big hill be one side or other—not in front. That's how I know."

"Hill," said Dick, puzzled. "I haven't seen any."

"Then you not look very good. Mebbe you not look right time. Morning early, before sun him get too bright, you see 'em plain. Jus' before sunset another good time. Tonight you try it an' see."

"I will," said Dick, as he turned back to drive Toma's team. "You may depend upon it."

So, just before sunset, he called an early halt and while the other members of the party unharnessed the teams and proceeded to make supper, he climbed to the crest of a small hill and gazed off towards the northeast. Shadows had already commenced to appear along the hollows and ridges. There was no glare over the snow now. He could see for miles across that forsaken, desolate land.

Yet at first he could see nothing that resembled a hill. Where the horizon began, it was true, there reposed what looked like a bank of mist, but which, unlike mist, remained perfectly stationary and unchanging in form—a sort of purplish blotch against the blue background of the sky.

This, he decided, must be the hill Toma referred to. It didn't look like one to his inexperienced eyes, yet hill it must be. The young Indian had good eyesight and a vast knowledge of the North stored away in that clever brain of his. At any rate, provided it didn't disappear during the night, he would use that hill or blotch, or whatever it was, as the goal for tomorrow's weary trek.

He returned to find supper waiting for him. The dog mushers sat huddled around the blazing campfires, resting after their arduous day. Dick was glad that he had called a halt earlier than usual. The physical strain of tramping hour after hour through soft, yielding drifts had been almost unendurable.

Usually after the evening meal, Dick remained beside the campfire to talk with Sandy and Dr. Brady, but tonight he felt too tired. After he had eaten, he bade his friends good-night and repaired to his tent, where he was soon lost in sleep.

When he awakened, a blue darkness still enveloped the earth. It was very early. He had a vague notion that he had been disturbed. Somewhere at the back of his consciousness was the dim memory of voices and running footsteps. But whether this was reality or a fragment of some vivid dream, he could not say. He lay still for a few minutes, listening.

Satisfied, at length, that he had heard nothing, that it was all an illusion, he turned on his side and attempted to go back to sleep. Just then there broke across his hearing, unusually clear and distinct, a shrill human cry. The cry was followed by the sound of a struggle and a muffled groan.

In a flash, Dick was up and fumbling for a candle. He tore into his clothes. He sprang to the tent opening and darted through—coatless, hatless, a revolver gripped firmly in his right hand. He made his way

quickly toward the sound of struggling, arriving just as two men swayed to their feet and seized each other in another desperate embrace.

In the darkness, it was impossible to tell who the two combatants were. For the life of him, Dick could not guess their identity. However, he advanced, gun held in readiness.

"Stop it! Stop it, I say. I have you covered."

The two figures drew apart. Dick wondered if they weren't two of his own dog drivers, between whom ill-feeling existed, and who were employing this method to settle their differences. Imagine his surprise when the voice of Toma broke the quiet.

"Dick! You!" he puffed. "This fellow he put up pretty good fight. Twice he almost get away."

"But who is it?" Dick asked wonderingly. "Who is it, Toma?"

"Lamont," answered the young Indian briefly.

Dick took a step forward and almost dropped his gun.

"Lamont!" he exploded. "Lamont! Lamont! It can't be——"

"It is," said Toma stubbornly. "Pretty soon you find out. You see I tell you right."

"But what in the name of—" Dick began, then paused breathless. "Lamont—what's he doing here? How did you happen to find him, Toma? What were you fighting about?"

"I wake up over there in tent," Toma explained, "when I hear something go by. First I think mebbe it one of the huskies. Then I here more noise out by my sledge. I dress quick as I can an' go out there. No gun!—nothing! An' I find him this thief try to steal. Soon as he hear me, he start run over here, near your tent. I grab him by shoulder, but he slip away again. More run. Again I catch him. I trip him down an' grab him by his throat. Then he make yell."

"You've done well, Toma," Dick complimented him. "Good boy!"

He turned upon the panting culprit.

"Mighty glad you've come back. Very kind of you. This is a pleasure we hadn't expected," he could not conceal, even in this attempt at sarcasm, the satisfaction and relief the guide's coming had brought. He seized Lamont by the arm.

"Step lively now over to that tent. You've played your last little game with me."

Flourishing his gun, he sent the former guide staggering ahead with a well-directed push.

"Get in there," he thundered, "and be quick about it! We'll have a pleasant little talk—you and I. There are a few things I want to tell you."

He followed Lamont inside, motioning to Toma to follow him. In the feeble light of the single fluttering candle eagerly he scanned the downcast features

of the man who had caused him so much misery and trouble. He pointed to his bunk.

"Sit over there."

For a moment he glowered, then:

"What were you doing here? Why did you come back?"

The guide looked up, his squint eye gleaming defiantly, his mouth quivering with suppressed anger and humiliation.

Silence.

"Answer me!" shouted Dick.

Lamont's eyes fell before the young leader's unblinking gaze. His fingers played nervously with the worn fringe of his short fur coat.

"If you don't talk," stormed Dick, "It will go hard with you. Why did you come back?"

"I get lonesome," lied Lamont. "I get lonesome all time out there alone."

"A very pretty story," laughed Dick. "You come back in the middle of the night because you were lonesome. You didn't come back, of course, to steal. Getting hungry, weren't you? Thought you'd come over and sample our supplies. Well, you failed. You're a thief, Lamont, a dirty thief, and when we arrive at Keechewan I'll turn you over to Corporal Rand of the mounted police. How'll you like that, eh?"

At mention of the dreaded name, the guide stirred

uneasily. He looked up again, his features distorted with fear.

"I no help I come back," his voice broke. "What else I do? I get hungry like you say. You owe me money. What hurt I come here an' get little something to eat, get mebbe few dollars grub. Anyway," he hurried on, "you tell me no want me here. You say go."

This, of course, was perfectly true. Dick had told Lamont that his services were no longer required.

"Yes, I told you. But you had no right to come back here to steal. Now you'll be punished for it. You'll remain with this party, Lamont. You'll work. You'll break trail. You'll guide us. I'll watch you close, and there'll be a bullet for you if you try to escape. You won't have an easy time of it like you had before, Lamont."

The guide did not answer. He merely sat and glared at his accuser. He was nervous and ill at ease. Dick consulted his watch.

"It's now four o'clock," he announced to Toma. "Everyone will be awake in two hours. We might as well stay up."

Toma rose to his feet.

"I take this fellow over to my tent," he said winking at his chum. "Him hungry, very hungry, he say. All right, we make him start to work. He

get himself big breakfast. Get breakfast for you, me too. Start campfire. Do plenty work."

"That's not a bad idea. I'll go over with you."

He motioned to Lamont to follow the young Indian outside, then remained behind for a moment to blow out the candle. A short time later, they stood around while Lamont worked.

The guide offered no objections. He was hungry, so hungry indeed, that he would have worked gladly for hours for a mere crust.

Lamont, Toma and Dick were sitting around the fire at breakfast when the camp awoke. Here and there a light flickered through the gloom. The plaintive howling of the malemutes and huskies. Drowsy human voices. The sharp, quick blows of an ax, crackling brush. Ruddy flames leaping up, brighter and brighter. More noise and bustle and confusion.

They were still sitting there, when Dr. Brady and Sandy appeared. The pair of them came up, laughing, but, at sight of Lamont wolfing his food, they paused in sheer wonderment.

Dick beckoned to them.

"It's all right, doctor. Don't hesitate, Sandy. Come on over. He's perfectly harmless. Permit me to introduce him to you. Gentlemen," he grinned, "Mr. Martin Lamont—our guide!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE LONE CABIN

The days that followed proved arduous for the guide. No longer, in lordly, domineering manner, was he permitted to ride on one of the sledges and point out the way. His hours of leisure were at an end. He took his turn in breaking trail, drove dogs, chopped wood, assisted in putting up and taking down the tents, and in many other ways became a useful and valuable member of the expedition.

His presence, distasteful as it was, had brought a quick change in the spirits of the party. Hope rose again in Dick's heart, and his enthusiasm and energy were unbounded. He had ceased to worry about getting lost or even wandering from the trail. Threatened with the most dire punishment, Lamont was forced to set their course.

Shortly after the return of the guide, they came upon the first log cabin they had seen since leaving Mackenzie River. It stood in a thick clump of trees, and had been recently built judging from the freshly-scored logs and its general appearance of newness.

A flutter of interest, not unmixed with awe and wonderment and curiosity, stirred the party. Necks craned suddenly, drivers deserted their teams to go forward to talk to other drivers, even the huskies raised their tawny heads, as if to sniff out this new mystery.

In the lead at the time, breaking trail, Sandy gave the cabin the benefit of one swift look of appraisement, then started forward on the run. He proceeded very rapidly for fifty or sixty yards, then stopped short so abruptly that the point of one snowshoe became entangled in the other and he fell headlong.

Dick and Dr. Brady both started to laugh, but the sound died on their lips. They watched Sandy rise and start back, waving his arms frantically. The driver of the first team pulled up short. The second team, close behind the first, also pulled up short, but not soon enough to prevent an entanglement, which led to a furious fight among the malemutes.

Dick and Dr. Brady ran to the driver's assistance, reaching the scene of trouble just a moment before Sandy arrived breathless. White-lipped, the young Scotchman waited until the commotion had subsided.

"Dr. Brady," he began, "I guess you——"

His words trailed off to a mumbling incoherence. He sat down on the sledge, gesturing a little wildly, his expression difficult to describe.

"Did you——" he inquired in horror-struck tones, "I say, did you see—see it, too?"

Dr. Brady nodded gravely. Dick stared, moistening his lips.

"A red flag," said the physician. "We weren't quite sure. There was something there just outside fluttering—— A cloth. A rag of some sort. Looked red."

"Exactly," Sandy spoke tersely with a deep intake of breath. "Smallpox!"

"Smallpox!" Dick echoed the word.

"I'll go over," announced Dr. Brady quite calmly. "Get my case, Dick."

The case was brought. The physician took it smiling.

"Shall we go with you?" asked Dick.

"No; it isn't necessary. You'd better stay here."

The news quickly spread. Smallpox! Faces grew gray and anxious. One by one, the drivers slunk back to their places, while all talk ceased.

Finally, Sandy jerked his hand back in the direction of the cabin.

"We'll see lots of that sort of thing before we return to the Mackenzie."

"Yes, when we get to Keechewan. But I doubt if we'll find another smallpox case this side of the Barrens," said Dick. "Terrible business, isn't it?"

Both, as if by a common impulse, looked up and

stared over at the cabin. The red cloth fascinated them. It furled and fluttered softly, yet ominously, in the light breeze.

The boys wondered what Dr. Brady was doing. He had entered the cabin, closing the door after him. They both started as the door opened and their friend emerged. They saw him raise one arm, beckoning them to come closer. A little fearfully, Dick and Sandy obeyed. They were strangely excited. Stalking up before the door, they observed that the physician was very grave indeed.

"Well?" said Dick, the first one to speak.

Brady stepped away from the door and came toward them, his eyes evasive.

"There's only one thing to do," he announced in a curiously soft and gentle voice. "Set fire to the cabin. We're too late."

"Too late?" repeated Sandy.

"Yes, too late."

"How—how many inside there?" whispered Dick.

"Two half-breed trappers—one young and one old."

"And they both had it?" the boys asked in unison.

"Yes," Dr. Brady's mouth twitched at the corners. "They're gone. We came too late. As I just said, there's only one thing to do: Set fire to the cabin. Burn it down."

"Burn it," asked Sandy. "What for?"

"As a matter of precaution. To protect the lives of others. Now and again, some lone wanderer might chance this way."

Sandy and Dick stood looking at the physician during an odd interval of silence. Of course, he knew best. They realized that. And it would save time. Dick touched Sandy's shoulder and together the two friends moved toward the timber at the back of the house. They carried dry bark and branches, soon gathering a large pile, which they threw down in front of the door. Soon a fire was started. It mounted slowly at first, smouldering and cracking, but presently it leaped up, quickly spreading to every part of the building.

"That's done," Sandy sighed relievedly. "Let's go back."

It was a little awkward joining the party again. Yet no one questioned them. They were greeted with curious stares and frightened glances. At noon they were miles away and halted for a midday meal in the shelter of a spruce grove, through which there ran the wandering course of a tiny stream.

It occurred to Dick that this stream might be one of the tributaries of the Wapiti River, which they must cross ere long. He was discussing this possibility with Toma, shortly after lunch, when Sandy came up shaking his head.

"A pretty business! A pretty business!" he mut-

tered, taking a place beside them. "They're as frightened as sheep. Too bad we had to come across that cabin. Hope nothing serious grows out of this."

"What do you mean?" asked Dick.

"Just look at them."

Dick turned and looked toward the place Sandy indicated. The dog drivers were assembled there in an excited, gesticulating group.

"I overheard part of it," said Sandy. "They're telling each other that they don't want to go on, that they're afraid, that no white man's medicine can save them from the horror of the plague."

"But all of them have been vaccinated," Dick protested.

"Sure. But they don't realize what that means. They have guessed, somehow, that the men who lived in that cabin died. They know the meaning of that red cloth, and it has struck terror into their hearts. I heard Fontaine say that he, for one, intended to turn back."

"Mere talk," objected Dick. "They'll get over it. The thing is fresh in their minds now and, of course, they're worried. By tomorrow or the next day they'll have forgotten all about it."

"Do you think so. I can't help feeling that in some way Lamont is at the bottom of this. He's stirring them up."

"I believe you're right." Dick stared moodily into the fire. "Come to think about it, I saw Lamont talking to them."

"Well," said Sandy, "we'd better watch him. And the others, too. You know what it will mean if they decide to leave us."

Dick's face shadowed, then brightened quickly. Such a possibility seemed remote. Surely, they'd do nothing of the kind. They wouldn't dare.

"They'll soon forget," he said.

But in this, as it subsequently proved, he was mistaken. That night a deputation came to him. The face of each of the drivers was set and determined. Altogether they were an ominous crew. They gathered around him and abruptly Fontaine, who acted as their spokesman, spoke up:

"M'sieur Dick, these fellow," indicating his following, "they tell me no want to go any farther. No want to die. Smallpox get 'em sure. You know that. You know everybody die pretty soon jus' like them fellow in cabin."

"Nonsense," said Dick. "You're all vaccinated."

Fontaine shook his head with great emphasis.

"No good that. Nothing stop smallpox. Very bad. Make 'em all die, these fellow."

"But you know better yourself, Fontaine. You know that isn't true. We're all safe enough. Tell them not to worry. They need not be afraid."

A mutter of defiance ran around the little circle. Fontaine's voice rose to a higher pitch.

"No good tell 'em that. They understand what you say. They know better."

Dick was rapidly losing ground. In desperation, he raised one arm, calling for silence.

"But wait! Just wait!" he beseeched them. "I will bring the white doctor to you and he will explain. Dr. Brady will repeat what I have told you. There is no danger. If you do not believe me, surely you will believe him. He is a great medicine man."

"That doctor him very much mistake," a new voice broke into the discussion.

Turning quickly, Dick perceived Lamont standing at his elbow.

"Who asked *you* for *your* opinion?" Dick demanded hotly. "Lamont, keep out of this."

The guide's defective left eye rolled up in a way that made Dick shiver. The man stepped back, leering.

"Lamont know all about this," Fontaine cut in quickly. "He tell me his father, two brothers die from smallpox four years ago. White doctor him there, too. Try help. No good. What you say about that?"

Dick had nothing to say. It was a lie, of course. A story to feed these frightened and credulous fools. He could see the purpose in it all.

"I tell you another thing," Fontaine took up the thread of his plaint, now speaking triumphantly. "One of these fellows," he pointed to a half-breed, who stood directly opposite, "think mebbe already he get sick. All afternoon his head hurt. Him feel very hot—deezzy."

"Faugh!" grunted Dick. "It isn't the smallpox. He wasn't within three hundred yards of the cabin. And even if he were exposed, he wouldn't get sick less than ten hours later."

But the drivers were obdurate. Sandy, Toma, and later, Dr. Brady himself took turns in pleading and arguing with them, but to no avail. Fontaine insisted that one of their party had already contracted the disease, so the physician examined the man while the rest of the drivers went to their tents. Outside Brady's tent, Dick, Sandy and Toma waited impatiently.

"Well," asked Sandy, when the doctor finally appeared, "what is your verdict?"

"I'm not quite sure yet," answered the physician. "But the symptoms are—smallpox."

"How can that be? He's vaccinated," Dick protested.

"Yes, on several different occasions, but the vaccine took no effect. There are cases like that."

Dick moved over to one of the sledges, too discouraged and alarmed to trust himself to speak. For

several minutes he stood, gazing off across the white bleak waste of snow and wilderness. Back near one of the campfires, the drivers had come together again to discuss the all-important topic.

"You see what we're up against, doctor," Dick turned suddenly. "If they won't listen to reason, we're beaten."

"Yes," echoed Sandy, "we're beaten. Licked. We can't go on without drivers."

The doctor rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"The situation may not be quite as serious as you think," he attempted to cheer them. "Before morning they'll probably change their minds."

CHAPTER XIV

OUTWITTED

Dr. Brady broke off a twig from a branch above his head and sat down on the sledge near Dick, commencing to trace queer patterns in the new, loose snow.

"It will soon be time to start on again, won't it?" asked the doctor.

"It's eight-thirty," Dick replied. "We should have started a half hour ago."

"Why not try taking a firmer hand with them," suggested Brady. "Tell them that if they won't go on with the party, they can return without supplies. That ought to frighten them."

"I'll try it," Dick fell in with the suggestion. "Come on. We must do something. I want you fellows to back me up. Maybe there'll be trouble."

The drivers were still arguing amongst themselves as the four approached.

"Fontaine, come here."

The spokesman drew away from his fellow conspirators.

"Yes, M'sieur Dick."

"Tell the others to harness the dogs. It's time to start."

Fontaine's eyes sought the ground.

"They no go, m'sieur," he declared doggedly.

"What do they intend to do?"—brusquely.

"Nothing. They say go back to Mackenzie."

"Utter nonsense. You'll never make it. It's hundreds of miles south of here. You'll starve before you get there."

"Starve!" exclaimed Fontaine. "But, M'sieur Dick, you mus' be mistake. You have plenty grub here. Fellows no go back without grub."

"That's exactly what they'll have to do if they leave this party—everyone of them. You'll get nothing from me. I'll shoot the first man that makes an attempt to take anything with him. Do you understand, Fontaine?"

The spokesman blinked and backed away. Here was a turn of events neither he nor any of the others had anticipated. It made their position somewhat untenable. It required careful consideration—more discussion. Quickly he turned and broke forth in Cree. It volleyed from him. He punctuated his talk with rapid-fire gestures.

When he had completed his oration, a deep silence fell. It was an angry silence. The half-breed drivers glowered.

"Well, what's your decision?" Dick spoke sharply.

Fontaine was coldly deliberate.

"We eight men against four. We no go on. Fellows get supplies an' start back to Fort Mackenzie."

Dick was astounded. He looked up appealingly at Dr. Brady, his pulses quickening. He observed that Sandy's hands trembled. A sudden movement among the dog drivers attracted his attention. All of them had started forward menacingly, then as quickly fell back. For a brief moment Dick wondered at this hesitancy on their part, but catching sight of Toma, the truth of the situation flashed over him. That young man stood, fondling an ugly-looking revolver, his eyes defying them to come on.

Sandy was quick to see their temporary advantage, and he, too, whipped out his gun. The mutinous dog drivers attempted to slink away, but Dick perceived their little ruse and stopped them peremptorily:

"No, you don't. Stay right where you are until I relieve you of your guns."

Three of the men carried revolvers, while all of them possessed knives. He quickly secured all these, placing them on one of the sleighs. Then, while Sandy and Toma kept the men covered, he and Dr. Brady hurried over to the tents and sledges, returning with three rifles and four more revolvers.

"Quite an arsenal," puffed Dr. Brady.

"Yes, and they won't get them back either," Dick

retorted. "Without arms, they'll be helpless. During the day while we're traveling, I'll keep them on my sledge with the mail, and at night in my tent with a guard posted. That means we'll have to take turn, the four of us, at sentinel duty."

Placing their load of weapons on Dick's sledge, they rejoined Sandy and Toma, who still guarded the mutineers.

"You can put away your guns," ordered Dick.

"But what about these prisoners?" Sandy asked.

"I think they'll be willing to go back to their teams now. Is it not so, Fontaine?"

The stalwart French half-breed pretended not to hear.

"Fontaine," Dick raised his voice, "did you hear what I said? You can all go now. Take up your tents, harness your dogs the same as usual, and get ready to start."

The dog drivers were at a disadvantage and they knew it. There was nothing to do but to obey. Yet it was with much muttering and grumbling, that they turned again to their morning's routine. They would bide their time. The boys had gained the upper hand now, but this was only the first round in a battle of wits. Tomorrow, perhaps, they might be the victors.

"We'll have to watch them day and night," Sandy declared, shoving the revolver back in its holster and turning away. "Heaven help us, if they ever get

a chance at those guns again—or those deadly-looking knives."

"Yes," agreed Dr. Brady, "I don't like their looks. Naturally, they'll resent this. I think that we can expect trouble. I'll volunteer for the first night's guard duty."

"That's splendid of you, doctor," Dick smiled. "But we'll let you off easy. You can stand guard from eight until twelve tonight, and I'll take your place for the remaining hours until morning."

The first day, following the events narrated above, passed without incident. On the second day, however, the driver, whom Fontaine said had contracted smallpox, and whom Dr. Brady later had examined, died suddenly. The morale of the party tottered. If ever the half-breeds had placed any faith in the medicine of the white man, they lost it now. Again they became panic stricken. The muttering and the complaining broke out afresh. Hourly, it grew more and more difficult to keep them at their work. Dick found it necessary to have either Sandy or Toma drive the last team in the line, with instructions to be ever on the alert, their revolvers always in readiness.

That night, fearing trouble, Sandy, whose turn it was to stand guard for the first part of the night, asked Dick to keep him company.

"I hope you don't mind, old chap. The truth is,

I'm a little bit afraid. I have a feeling that the time is nearly at hand for them to strike. I don't like the way they've been acting."

"Nor I," said Dick. "They're up to something. They gather about in little groups, whispering. Fontaine and Lamont keep stirring them up."

"Their first move," reasoned Sandy, "will be to try to get back their rifles and cartridges. With these in their possession, they'll be able to take what supplies they want and return to Mackenzie."

"A sorry day for them if they do," Dick declared. "Inspector Cameron will know how to deal with them."

"Of course, that is true. But they don't stop to think about that. Their chief worry now is to get away."

As usual, the mail and guns were taken to Dick's tent, where the two boys stood guard. This constant vigilance was wearing upon them. The three boys and Dr. Brady suffered from lack of sleep, yet each day they were compelled to carry on. There was no help for it.

Despite Sandy's presentiment, no attack was made that night, nor yet on the following day. Late in the afternoon, while crossing a low chain of hills, they perceived, about a quarter of a mile away, a small Indian encampment, consisting of four lonely tepees.

"There may be smallpox there," said Dr. Brady. "I'd better go over there."

Leaving Sandy and Toma behind to watch the camp during their absence, Dr. Brady and Dick went forward to investigate. They were received warmly at the first tepee, and were informed that no one was ill. In fact, the Indians had not even heard of the epidemic. At each of the tepees in turn they were received graciously until they came to the fourth and last.

Here their reception was very cool indeed. The place was occupied by an aged Indian couple and by a young man, evidently their son. This young man became very angry upon their entrance. He sat opposite the entrance, blankets wrapped around him, and scowled continuously. When Dick questioned him, he refused to answer, pretending that he did not understand. The old Indian squaw seemed to be the only one equipped with vocal powers. Over and over, she kept repeating the words in English:

"Go 'way! Go 'way!"

"Don't seem to be very popular here," grinned Dr. Brady. "Well, there's no use of staying very long. I'll vaccinate them as quickly as I can and then we'll be on our way."

Yet when Dr. Brady opened his medicine case and attempted to vaccinate them, they repulsed him

stoutly. They were afraid of the doctor. His instruments frightened them. It was evident that they believed that his ministrations were for no other purpose than to subject them to some new and mysterious torture. Finally, the young Indian rose threateningly and commanded them to depart.

As he did so, Dick drew back in surprise. The Indian wore boots, heavy top-boots—the service boots of the Royal Mounted Police—and, what was even more astonishing, a service revolver in its holster at his side. For a full moment he stared at the tell-tale articles, scarcely believing his eyes. Where had the Indian secured these things? Certainly not from the police—unless they had been taken by force or stolen. Dick's arm trembled as he took Dr. Brady's arm and pulled him toward the entrance.

"Come on, doctor, we'd better get out of here. It's no use."

Outside the tepee, he turned quickly upon his companion:

"I say, doctor, did you notice what that young Indian wore?"

"No," replied Dr. Brady, "I didn't notice particularly. Moosehide garments, weren't they?"

"No. No. The boots, I mean—the revolver!"

"Yes, he did have boots. Rather queer, isn't it? They usually wear moccasins."

"Usually wear moccasins!" exploded Dick. "Why those were mounted police boots. They're different. No one else wears them. And that revolver, holster and belt could have been obtained from no other person on earth except a policeman."

"That's strange. I wonder how he came by them?"

Dick did not answer immediately. His mind had turned to very sober thoughts. The more he dwelt upon this unusual circumstance—an Indian wearing mounted police boots and carrying a service revolver —the more he became perplexed. As they made their way back to their own party, his suspicions grew. A great fear tugged at his heart.

"Dr. Brady," he began very soberly, "I don't like this. I'm afraid——"

The physician turned and smiled.

"What? Still thinking about those boots? I wouldn't worry, if I were you, Dick. The explanation is probably simple enough. The boots and revolver might have been discarded. Aren't you troubling yourself needlessly?"

"No, I think not. You remember Corporal Rand, don't you, the man Inspector Cameron spoke of, the one he sent up here ahead of us, and about whom he was so worried?"

"Why, yes," said Dr. Brady. "Corporal Rand. The name is familiar."

"Well," trembled Dick, "I have a terrible suspicion that those boots and that revolver belong to him."

It was Brady's turn to become grave.

"And you believe that he——"

"I don't know what to believe," Dick filled in the pause. "It looks bad. They might have killed him. They——"

He broke off, overcome by such a probability.

"You see, doctor," he resumed, "Corporal Rand wouldn't carry an extra pair of boots and probably not an extra revolver along with him. Just remember that. If the Indian didn't kill him, something or someone else did. He might have taken those things off Rand's dead body. Somehow, I feel that I ought to go back and question him—make him talk. I don't like the looks of this."

They were now within a short distance of their own party, and an idea suddenly occurred to Dick.

"Tell you what I'll do. I'll get Toma to go with me. He speaks the Indian language more fluently. The two of us will go over there armed and compel that rascal to confess. And we won't come back either until——"

Dr. Brady interrupted him. Dr. Brady had seized him by the shoulders and was staring into his face, his eyes wide with excitement. Then he swung the

younger man in front of him, released him, and with one trembling hand pointed in the direction of their camp.

"Look at that! Look at that! What? I say——"

Instantly Dick's body grew taut. The color drained from his cheeks. He shook off the restraining hand and started forward. He ran. He shouted out at the top of his voice, one hand fumbling with the holster at his side. In his haste to get forward quickly, he stumbled and fell. As he rose to his feet, he broke into an exclamation of dismay.

He was too late! The long-looked-for attack had taken place. The drivers had overpowered Toma and Sandy, had seized the guns, two of the dog teams and sledges, loaded with supplies, and were now hurrying back. They had accomplished their purpose and had made good their escape. When Dick reached the scene of disaster a few minutes later, he cried out in his rage and exasperation.

Thrown across one of the sledges were Toma and Sandy, bound securely hand and foot. A few yards away, lying helplessly in the snow, was the unconscious form of one of the drivers, who, upon closer examination, proved to be Lamont. Everywhere was confusion and disorder. Several of the sledges had been overturned, their loads scattered.

Dick took out his hunting knife and cut the rope which bound his two chums. They were both a little

dazed, but had not been seriously hurt. They looked at him with sombre eyes.

"How did it happen?" asked Dick.

Sandy sat up and commenced rubbing his chafed arms and legs. Tears of exasperation trickled down his cheeks.

"It came so—so suddenly, Dick," he choked. "I can't begin to tell you. We were sitting on the mail sledge, when one of the drivers came along, passing about twenty feet away. He acted queerly. He commenced to groan, and then suddenly he fell down in the snow, just as if he had fainted dead away. It was a trick—but we didn't know it. We rushed over to help him. We were stooping down when they came up from behind—the whole crowd of them, and seized us so quickly we didn't have a chance. I'm so—so——"

Fresh tears trickled from his eyes again.

"But Lamont—what's he doing there? What happened to him? If you didn't have a chance to do anything, how did he receive his injury?"

"Toma—— When they grappled with him, he fired from his hip and got Lamont."

Dr. Brady, who had come panting up in time to hear Sandy's story, now turned toward the prostrate body of the guide, and with the help of Dick and Toma, carried him over and placed him on one of the sledges.

"He'll never make the trip," presently announced the doctor. "He's hit in the shoulder—a dangerous wound—and will never be able to stand the jarring and jolting of one of the sledges. We'll have to leave him here."

"How can we do that?" asked Sandy. "He'd freeze. He'd—he'd——"

"There's the Indian encampment," suggested the physician. "They can look after him."

"Good riddance," declared Dick. "I, for one, won't be sorry."

There followed an awkward silence.

"The Indian encampment," said Dick at length, "will be forced not only to look after Lamont but to supply us with several drivers. Perhaps one of them will know the way to Keechewan."

He paused, gesturing hopelessly.

"In any event, we'll have to push on. We can't stop."

Dr. Brady nodded grimly.

CHAPTER XV

BILL AND THOMAS

In front of a crackling wood fire, three men dried their wet and bedraggled garments. In spite of the close proximity to the blaze they shivered and their teeth chattered and they looked very unhappy and uncomfortable, indeed. Two of the men wore the conventional garb of white prospector or trapper, while the third, a tall, rather handsome fellow with clear blue eyes and a decisive chin, was arrayed in what might once have been a uniform of his majesty's Royal North West Mounted Police.

"We gotta thank you," said one of the men quite humbly, "fer gettin' us out of that river. Yuh saved our lives all right, but our grub-stake an' ever'thing we had is gone."

"Yes," he resumed mournfully. "Gone! It's Bill's fault."

"I think," said the man in the wretched uniform, "that it was partly my fault. I startled him. I shouldn't have cried out to you. It drew his atten-

tion and for a moment he must have forgotten to steer."

The maligned and unfortunate person referred to as "Bill," drew himself up to a proud height and grunted his disdain. Then he turned his back haughtily upon his partner and addressed himself to the man in the uniform.

"Thomas here," he declared deprecatingly, jerking one thumb over his shoulder, "ain't allers responsible fer what he says. I wasn't the only one that's been a steerin' o' that boat. He was a helpin' too. An' he kep' puttin' me off, Thomas did, with his jabbin' here an' there in the water, like the crazy fool what he is."

"No such thing," remonstrated Thomas. "Did yuh tell the officer what yuh done yisterday? I 'spose that wuz all my fault too—you runnin' aground."

Bill wheeled about so swiftly that his dripping garments sprayed water in every direction. For a moment even the fire sputtered.

"A lie!" shouted the now infuriated Bill. "I wuz asleep in the boat an'——"

He paused for breath.

"Asleep when yuh wuz supposed to be on duty," his partner completed the sentence for him. "That's the trouble with you, Bill. You don't pay no 'tention to nothin'. Yuh don't use your brains; yuh don't look; yuh don't listen. Yuh go 'round dreamin', with

your head up in the air an' your intelligence in the seat o' your pants. An'," Thomas completed his lecture defiantly, "I won't take that back neither."

The conversation had reached a critical, dangerous stage, and the man in the frayed uniform thought it wise to intervene.

"If you'll pardon me, gentlemen, I believe I can settle this dispute. I've been thinking it over, and the more I think about it, the more clearly it appears to me that the responsibility is all mine. It was my shout that startled both of you, that put you off—that caused all the trouble. I'd like to apologize."

"It wuz a terrible shout," admitted Thomas.

"Sounded like the howl of a madman," declared Bill. "But yuh saved our lives an' that's somethin' I won't forget in a hurry. We'd be down in the bottom of the river now, keepin' company with our rifles an' our grub-stake, if it hadn't been for you."

The man in the uniform acknowledged the compliment with a somewhat weary smile.

"I'm afraid I saved you from one disaster only to plunge you into another. What are you going to do now?"

"Jus' what do yuh mean?" asked Bill.

"How will you manage without rifles and supplies?"

Bill shook his head mournfully and turned to his partner.

"He's askin' yuh a question," he upbraided him. "can't yuh hear?"

Thomas immediately applied himself to the problem in hand. He stared gloomily at the fire. Suddenly he brightened. He addressed the mounted policeman:

"But you got grub, ain't yuh? You can sell us a little—enough to take us over to Half-Way House."

"I'm almost in as bad straits as you are. I have a little flour—five or six pounds. I've had trouble too."

"Five or six pounds o' flour ain't very much fer three hungry men like us," ruminated Bill.

"Worse than nothin'," said Thomas bitterly. "An' that's all yuh got?"

"All. Absolutely all! Found it in a cabin back here in the woods. I'm very sorry, gentlemen."

Thomas dismissed the matter with a wave of his hand.

"If it can't be helped—it can't. I been plenty hungry before this."

"Me too," murmured Bill.

An interval of silence, during which three men shivered and shook before the fire—a fire that had commenced to burn itself out. Red, angry embers blinked up at them.

"Your turn to gather more wood," Bill informed Thomas.

Thomas scowled at the unpleasant imminence of this chilly duty and spat disgustedly into the lowering flames.

"Yuh better hurry," implacably his partner spurred him on. "We'll soon be freezin' entirely. There ain't enough heat here to warm a sparrow."

Thomas grunted out an oath before he departed, purposely bumping against Bill as he lumbered past.

"Yuh can see the sort o' disposition he's got," Bill complained to the policeman. "I been aputtin' up with this sort o' thing fer ten years now—ten years this comin' March since we become partners."

In spite of the fact that he was shivering, uncomfortable, worried, suffering untold agonies from his feet, the man in the frayed uniform smiled quietly to himself.

"Why don't you break your partnership?" he suggested.

"Eh—what? What did yuh say, officer? Break up——"

For a moment Bill was so amazed, so utterly dumfounded at this simple solution to his difficulties, that he could not find words to express himself.

"That's what I said. Break up your partnership. Quit each other. Each go your own way," elucidated the policeman.

It was an appalling thought. Unthinkable. Bill tried to picture a bleak pattern of existence from

which Thomas had become erased. It filled him with a sense of loss so tremendously acute that it positively hurt. Little shivers of dismay ran up along his spine and seemed to settle there.

"Oh, Thomas ain't so bad, once yuh get used to him," he said. "Thomas got a queer way about him, an' he's cantankerous an' stubborn, but he really don't mean nothin'. Besides, I don't rightly know what Thomas'd do after I left. He's sort o' helpless without me. He's got so he sort o' depends on me. Wouldn't be worth his salt. I'd hate fer his sake——"

Thomas himself interrupted the conversation at this point by striding up with a huge armful of wood and throwing it angrily down upon the fire.

"Yuh can toast your shins now," he declared angrily, glancing at Bill. "But next time it's your turn."

"Next time it's my turn," admitted Bill pleasantly. "I won't ferget."

"You'll likely be asleep by then," sputtered Thomas. "Great guns!—but ain't that wind cold?"

"Winter'll soon be here," Bill croaked, humping up his shoulders and fighting back the smoke that drifted up around his head and into his eyes. "Six pounds o' flour between three men an' winter, an' five hundred miles to the nearest tradin' post."

"Keechewan Mission is closer than that," Thomas corrected him. "I 'spose we can go that way."

"Not me," shivered Bill. "I'm as close to Keechewan Mission as I intend to get."

"Did you come from there?" sharply inquired the policeman.

"No," answered Thomas, "but we heard about it. It's rotten with smallpox an' boilin' with trouble like a hot teakettle. It ain't no good place fer a white man to be."

"I'm going there," said the policeman.

"Yuh don't say?" gasped both men in one voice.

"If I can make it on two pounds of flour," appended the policeman.

"You said yuh had six," remembered Thomas.

"I'll divide with you in the morning."

Bill and Thomas exchanged glances of genuine wonder and admiration.

"I'd like tuh shake hands with you," declared Thomas in an awed voice, offering one dirty paw.

"Me too," said Bill, extending a hand equally as dirty. "You're a real man an' no mistake about that. What's your name, officer?"

"Corporal Rand."

"Where from?"

"Mackenzie barracks."

"If I ain't gettin' personal, where's your boots?"

"A Nitchie stole them one night while I slept."

"The dirty skunk!"

"An' your revolver?" noticed Thomas.

"Stole that too."

"Yuh mean to tell me," exploded Bill, "that you're goin' up to Keechewan like that—no boots, two pounds o' flour an' nothin' to protect yourself with when them rampagin' Nitchies catch sight o' yuh? If cold an' hunger don't get yuh, the smallpox will, an' if the smallpox don't get yuh, the Nitchies will. Yuh got about as much chance to come back alive as I have o' jumpin' up to the moon."

"You're a fool to try it," grumbled Thomas.

"I have my instructions," said Corporal Rand, and then remembered suddenly that this was not the truth. "I mean to say, I did have my instructions."

"An' yuh lost 'em?"

"No. The inspector changed his mind. He decided to go himself."

"Why didn't yuh let him?"

"It was either his life or mine."

Thomas was puzzled. He appealed to Bill.

"I can't make nothin' out of this, can you?"

Bill came to the rescue. He picked up the thread of discourse, where the other had let it fall.

"Do yuh mean to say that this here inspector's life is worth more to you than what your own is? That don't seem reasonable."

"I intend to give you four pounds of flour in the morning," Corporal Rand smiled. "Now do you

mean to tell me that your lives are worth more to me than my own. Just figure it out."

Bill and Thomas exchanged worried, doubtful glances, and commenced to figure. For twenty long minutes they threaded their way through a deep and abysmal mental swamp.

"I can't make it out," acknowledged Thomas.

"Me neither," grumbled Bill. "You're a bloomin' martyr an' no mistake."

"We ain't got nothin' we can give you," lamented Thomas, feeling in all of his pockets.

Then suddenly his face brightened.

"Here," he announced proudly, presenting it, "is somethin' yuh can have. Take it. Yuh never can tell. Mebbe it'll save your life."

Corporal Rand received the gift in the spirit that it was given. Nor did he belittle such a gift. Too well he knew the vagaries of the North, the unexpected turns of fortune, good and bad, the little inconsequential things upon which hinge life or death itself. Moisture had gathered in his eyes as carefully, almost lovingly, he put the gift away in an inner pocket:

Three fishhooks and a ball of string!

CHAPTER XVI

AN INDIAN WITH BOOTS

Dick, Sandy and Toma hurried over to the Indian encampment in the afternoon of the same day the dog drivers had deserted them. Toma, it was decided, would act as interpreter, while Sandy—as he expressed it—merely trailed along to lend his moral support and to give advice.

"You must offer them unheard of wages for the trip," reasoned Sandy. "We must give them presents and supplies. These Indians don't know the meaning or value of money, so you'd better make them an offer they can understand. I'd start out by offering each one a brand new rifle and a winter's grub-stake, also some bright-colored cloth for the squaws."

"That not bad idea," Toma approved. "I tell 'em that. I do my best. I say plenty. Make 'em good speech."

"You can say anything you like," Dick instructed him, "but don't promise them anything we can't give."

So Toma, in his role of employment agent, made

a round of the tepees. He was received warmly and, thus encouraged, waxed eloquent. He described to them the vast number of beautiful and useful things that could be obtained in the stores at the mission: Fruits (dried), of delicious flavor, from lands beyond the seas; meat from animals they had never tasted (pork); flour in large quantities for the making of bannock; sugar, both brown and white. Then, taking a new tack, for the benefit of the women, he told them about the multi-colored fabrics of wool and silk and cotton, of ornaments for the fingers and beads for the neck, of things that pleased and delighted the eye.

The Indians sat in open-mouthed wonder as Toma went breathlessly on with his fanciful description of the gifts that might be theirs if only the young men would assist them in driving the dog teams to Keechewan. And in order to convince them of the sincerity of his intentions, at Dick's request, he offered each of the families a small quantity of tea, sugar and bacon, to be delivered at once.

The leader of the Indians at the encampment made a quick calculation. Besides himself, he told Toma, there were eight able-bodied hunters. They could spare a few of these. Perhaps half could go. They would be very glad to help their white brothers. They would appreciate the gifts described. Toma and his friends could be assured of their co-operation.

A surge of happiness ran through Dick as he listened to the leader's words. Then he bethought him of Lamont, and his face clouded.

"Toma," he directed in English, "tell the leader about Lamont. Ask him if we can leave him here until we return."

After the request had been made, the boys waited expectantly.

"Who is this injured brother?" demanded the chief.

"A worthless dog," replied Toma. "He was a traitor to us. He and his companions fought us, and during the encounter I was compelled to shoot him."

The Indian's face darkened.

"Will my brother promise not to shoot any of my people?"

Toma hastened to set his mind at rest. Then he asked:

"When will your young men be ready to start? We are very anxious to proceed on our journey."

"Tomorrow morning," answered the leader.

In high spirits, the three chums left the Indian encampment and went back to their own camp. Dr. Brady greeted them anxiously.

"What luck?" he asked.

"I think we have been successful," Dick informed him.

"How many men?"

"The leader said four."

"And will they look after Lamont?"

"Yes, they gave us their promise. I think we'd better take him over there right away and pitch our tents. Might as well be there as here. Saves running back and forth, and besides, we promised the Indians a small quantity of provisions."

The remainder of the day passed quickly. A place was made for Lamont, and Dr. Brady succeeded in extracting the bullet and washed and dressed the wound. The guide had recovered consciousness by this time and lay staring up at the brown walls of the tepee with dark malevolent eyes.

When morning came, the boys rose early and went over to the leader's tepee, pleased when they found him and his household already awake.

"Are your young men ready?" asked Toma. "We wish to start."

For some inexplicable reason, during the night the Indian's manner had cooled. He received them with little of his former cordiality.

"Are your young men ready?" persisted Toma.

The leader fixed them with a sombre stare and, to the boys' surprise and astonishment, shook his head.

"They have asked me to inform you that they have changed their minds."

"Changed their minds!" Sandy started back in

dismay, while Dick rubbed his eyes, under the impression that he had not heard aright.

"They have decided not to go," repeated the leader.

"Toma," said Dick in hoarse undertones, "tell him to summon those young men and we will talk to them. They must go. They have promised."

The Indian complied with the request. Soon the young men appeared before them and stood awkwardly and shyly beside their leader. But every argument failed to move them. No, they would not go. They must look after their trap-lines. They were very sorry to disappoint their white brothers, but the thing was impossible.

In desperation, Toma made a brief summary of his speech of the day before. They were foolish to spurn his offer. He would even increase his reward. Instead of one rifle, he would give them two, and many traps and cartridges.

This time, however, his oratory suffered from repetition. The young men were very much interested but not enthusiastic. Only one of the four stepped forward to announce that he would go. Further argument proved useless.

"Well," said Dick, turning to Dr. Brady, "one man is better than none at all. We'll manage somehow, I suppose. I wonder if this young man knows the way to the mission?"

Upon being questioned, the Indian declared that he did.

"I will show you the way," he informed Toma.

Disappointed, the boys made their preparations for the start. Soon they were on the trail, their teams doubled up—twelve dogs in one string, pulling two sleighs; ten in another, while the only single team were the six malemutes who pulled the mail sledge. However, they were scarcely out of sight of the encampment, when, looking back, Sandy saw two figures on snowshoes, following them at a rapid rate.

"Stop!" he shouted to his companions ahead, immediately checking his own team.

They waited until the two figures came up to them, two Indians from the encampment: the leader and, to the boys' surprise, the young Indian, who wore the service boots and revolver of the mounted police.

"What do you want?" demanded Toma.

"This young man," replied the leader, pointing to his companion, "wishes to go with you too."

For a moment, Dick was in a quandary. He required the fellow's assistance, yet he was afraid to include him in their party. The Indian might be a murderer or a thief. His appearance was against him. He might prove to be a worse customer than Lamont. The leader noticed Dick's hesitation.

"He is a very good man on the trail," he hastened to assure them. "You will not be sorry if you take him."

"All right," decided Dick, "he can come along."

After all, he reasoned, it would be just as well if he did. Perhaps they might be able to discover the mystery of those boots.

Again the party started forward. With the acquisition of the man in the mounted police boots, they were now able to send one of their number forward to break trail. They hurried quickly along, and by noon had reached a height of land, looking down from which, they perceived the rugged valley of the Wapiti River. At sight of it, the boys' delight was unbounded.

"We're getting along splendidly," remarked Sandy. "If only the weather will stay like it is, it won't be very long now until we reach Keechewan."

"I hope weather get cold," said Toma. "Weather been warm now for two, three days. If it get cold, make 'em crust on snow. No need to break trail. Then we be able to go along very fast—mebbe fifty, sixty miles in one day. Dogs run all time."

"Yes, that's true."

But it was not until three days later, after they had crossed the Wapiti and were proceeding northward across a level, wind-swept district, that colder weather actually arrived. A fierce Arctic blast beat

down upon them, chilling their blood. Particles of frost hung in the air. Trees cracked, as the intense cold penetrated within, freezing the sap. Yet, though the weather was almost unendurable, Toma's prophecy had come true, and they were able to speed across the level waste, the miles dropping away behind them.

One night, following an intensely bitter spell of cold, they drew up to make camp in the lea of a tree-covered hill. All night long they took turn in replenishing the fires. But even with this help, and wrapped in blankets, fold on fold, they had difficulty in keeping warm. They were glad when morning came.

"I hope," shivered Dick to Sandy, muffling his face in the collar of his fur coat, "that the weather moderates a little before night. This is terrible. It must be fifty below."

"Seems more like seventy-five below to me," grumbled Sandy, stirring the fire with a long poplar stick, his eyes blinking as a flurry of wind caught the smoke and sent it whirling around him.

At this juncture, Dr. Brady came hurrying up, gesturing excitedly.

"I've more bad news for you, Dick. Just found out. Toma and I made the discovery."

Dick was conscious of a sudden sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"What is it, doctor?" he finally managed to articulate.

"Your team of malemutes is gone, and——"

"Oh, you must be mistaken," interrupted Dick. "They're here somewhere."

"And the mail sledge is gone too, including all that quantity of vaccine."

Sandy threw up his hands in a gesture of hopeless surrender.

"Is that all?" he groaned.

"No," answered the physician more calmly, "the Indian with the mounted police boots is gone too."

Dick gave way to his feeling of despair. He put his head in his hands and rocked back and forth.

"I knew it! I knew it!" he moaned. "I knew all the time that I ought not trust that—that miserable thief. I hesitated when his services were offered to me. I'm a fool. Why did I take him?"

"What I can't understand," Sandy broke forth, "—what I can't understand, Dick, is why he should take the sledge with the mail. There isn't a single thing on that sledge that would be of the least value to him."

"Of course, he didn't know that," Brady spoke up. "To his simple ignorant mind, those pouches of mail must have contained something of immense value. He'll be a very sorry, disgusted and probably repentant Indian when he discovers his mistake."

"He'll be a repentant Indian when I get my hands on him," stormed Dick, jumping to his feet and pulling his parka in place. "Well, I might just as well go after him."

"He has about three hours start of you," said Dr. Brady. "The only time he could have left this party was between four and five o'clock, when he was awakened to take his turn in replenishing the fires."

"I'll unload one of the sledges and take the swiftest team we have," decided Dick. "Travelling light, I ought to be able to overtake him."

"Can I go with you, Dick?" Sandy asked eagerly.

"I'd like to have you, Sandy, but Toma is better on the trail. I must hurry. Every minute counts. Dr. Brady, will you help Sandy pick out and harness a team, while Toma and I unload a sledge? We'll take our rifles and a few days' provisions."

In less than twenty minutes, they were ready. The dogs strained at their harness, eager to start. Toma took his place in the front of the sledge, Dick behind. A whip cracked. The voices of Dr. Brady and Sandy called out an encouraging farewell.

The huskies leaped forward.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PURSUIT

A cold bitter wind hurled its defiance along the slope, its shrieking voice trumpeting through the pines. In the sky—a vast canopy flung over a frozen world—the sun shone wanly. On either side of the sun hung sun-dogs. In the air—frost. Below, a limitless, monotonous expanse of snow.

In the sledge, which flew along over the hard snow-surface, Dick and Toma sat muffled to their ears. From time to time, they beat their arms about their shivering bodies and urged on the dogs. Already they had come eight or ten miles along the faint trail they had made on the previous day.

In their pursuit of the Indian they had expected, quite naturally, to go southwestward in the direction of the Indian encampment. With their lighter load and swifter team, they would rapidly gain on him. Before night, surely, they would overtake him. It was all simply a matter of time and patience and perseverance. In the end, they would be successful.

Much to their surprise, the thief chose a different

route entirely. Apparently he had no intention of returning to his home and friends with his ill-gained booty. A few miles farther on, he had set his course to the west, following a hill-chain that ran parallel to the Wapiti River.

The boys turned sharply and continued the pursuit. The sledge tracks of the thief could be discerned quite plainly.

"I can't imagine where he's going," mused Dick. "It isn't to his own home. Where do you suppose, Toma?"

"Mebbe up in the hills somewhere to another encampment. Mebbe him 'fraid to go back to his own people."

"Or," guessed the other, "perhaps his purpose is to make a secret cache up there in the hills. He thinks, no doubt, that the mail sacks and medicine chests are filled with valuable provisions. I'd like to see his face when he opens one of them."

Toma broke into a low chuckle.

"It make me laugh if he try drink medicine an' get very sick. Mebbe him fool enough to think medicine some new kind of whiskey."

"God help him, if he does. I don't know what sort of medicine Dr. Brady may have there. There's vaccine for smallpox and drugs of all kinds. I'm sure that some of them are deadly poison. He's apt to be more than sick if he tries it."

Presently the trail wound into the hills. It went up and up and up, and then down and then up again. It skirted deep ravines and dangerous precipices. It crossed the wide basin of a lake. It continued on—the rutted tracks of that thief's sledge—with the unbroken insistence of the passing of time itself.

"He's certainly travelling and no mistake. He must be going almost as fast as we are," complained Dick. "He'll kill that team of mine."

"Don't you worry, we catch him. Pretty soon we catch him."

"We will, of course, if we don't lose his trail. The fool will be compelled to stop soon for something to eat."

"Sometimes Indians go days without stop for something to eat," commented Toma.

"Not if he thinks he has a store of precious things aboard," grinned his companion. "His fingers will be itching to get at those sacks. He'll want to explore the mystery of those medicine chests."

Again Toma chuckled.

"This mail all same like 'em paper?" he inquired.

"It is paper," replied Dick. "Envelopes, hundreds of envelopes, bulging with paper. Then, in the second-class mail pouches, there'll be circulars and catalogs and newspapers, hundreds of pounds altogether to tempt his mounting appetite. I think he'll relish the stamps too. They'll be green and red,

with a picture of King George on one side and mucilage on the other. The mucilage has a sweet, toothsome taste he'll like."

Toma doubled up in a paroxysm of laughter.

"I think that very good joke on that Indian. Mebbe him find out it bad thing to steal."

"I don't know about that. He looks as if he were beyond redemption."

Toma cracked his whip, and the huskies sprang forward, scrambling up an incline. It was steep here, so Dick got out and trotted behind. The exercise warmed his feet and sent the blood racing through his body.

When he tumbled back on the sledge again, Toma half-turned and with the butt of his whip pointed excitedly at the dogs.

"Look!" he cried.

The sudden change in the behavior of the huskies was very noticeable. Their ears were pricked higher. The leader, a beautiful long-haired malemute, so much resembling a wolf that it was almost impossible to tell the difference, had commenced to whine softly, straining at her harness in fitful, nervous leaps.

"Somebody close ahead," Toma whispered. "We see 'em pretty quick now."

Dick leaned forward and picked up his rifle, and commenced fumbling with the breech. His expression had grown suddenly tense. He rose to a position on

his knees, swaying there from the motion of the sleigh, his gaze set unwaveringly, expectantly, on the trail ahead.

At a furious rate of speed, they descended another slope, then, more slowly, began circling up around the next hill, emerging to a sparsely wooded area, which, in turn, at the farther side, dropped abruptly to a deep tree-covered valley.

Abruptly, the boys turned toward each other. Toma muttered something under his breath; Dick relaxed to a sitting position, whistling his astonishment.

"I didn't expect anything like this," remarked Dick, recovering somewhat from his surprise. "An Indian village! Look, Toma, there are scores of tepees down there. No wonder he came this way."

Again they started—but not at the sight of those tepees, strung along the floor of the valley, nor yet at the sight of the Indians themselves, here and there plainly distinguishable—but at the appearance of a loaded sledge behind a team of gray malemutes, proceeding quickly toward the village.

"He isn't very far ahead of us," exulted Dick. "He'll soon be cornered. He can't get away. We've won, Toma."

Toma's eyes were shining.

"Him big fool to come here. What you think?"

"He may have friends. Perhaps they'll want to shield him."

The young Indian's answer was to crack his whip and to shout to the huskies. The sledge leaped forward. It threw up a quantity of loose snow, through which it plowed. It rocked perilously as it negotiated the top of the valley slope, then, in spite of Dick's foot pressed hard on the brake-board, shot down, almost running over the dogs.

Taking a steeper but more direct route to the village than had been attempted by the thief, they were only a few yards behind him when they made their final whirlwind spurt through the orderly row of tepees and the gaping crowds, and came to a jarring but dramatic halt.

The thief was unaware of his danger, had not even a premonition of the near presence of his pursuers, until, with a certain amusing dignity, he slipped from the top of his precious load and waved an exaggerated greeting to the crowd.

His triumph was short-lived. Out of the corner of one eye, he saw two figures who looked strangely familiar. In order to make sure, he turned his head and in that moment his self-confidence poured from him like water out of a bucket.

A tiny squeak, of the sort a mouse makes under the heel of an enraged householder, and his mittened

hands went straight up. He came forward, bellowing for mercy. Tears of terror welled into his eyes. Never before had Dick seen any person more craven, cowardly-weak and utterly disgusting than he. Somehow, it blunted the edge of his own and Toma's victory to take a man like that. It was too easy.

Startled at first, the onlookers broke into a roar of laughter. They were quick to grasp the situation. In a trice, the two boys and their prisoner were the pivot around which circled and revolved a jeering, highly-amused crowd.

"They ask 'em me to make 'em talk about how it all happen," Toma shouted in Dick's ear.

"Tell them that we'll explain later," Dick instructed. "Say that we want something to eat. Tell them——"

He broke off as the milling throng unexpectedly drew back, making a path for a white-haired old man, who carried himself with great dignity.

"Chief," said Toma.

"You talk to him."

"What I say?"

"Tell the truth, Toma. Nothing else. Explain to him that this man is a thief, that we followed him here to recover valuable mail and medicine for the sick. I'm sure he'll believe you. Be honest and straightforward, Toma."

Dick found it utterly impossible to keep his place

at his chum's side. A forward surge of the inquisitive swept him and his prisoner this way and that, while shoulders bumped shoulders and curious eyes peered into his. He was glad when the interview came to an end and the chief motioned for the crowd to disperse. Toma sought him out, smiling with satisfaction.

"Ever'thing all right, Dick. Chief him know this man for very bad fellow. He say him very glad if you leave him to be punish."

"Does he belong to this tribe?"

"Yes."

"I've a good notion to do it. It will save us a lot of trouble and worry. By the way, did you remember to tell him about the police boots and revolver?"

"Yes, I tell him that too."

"What did he say?"

"After while I tell you."

"Why not now, Toma?"

"You understand bye-'n'-bye. You come with me pretty soon to chief's tepee."

"All right. Well, they can have this cowardly sneak if they want him. I'm sure I don't."

A little later, escorted by one of the headmen of the village, Dick and Toma arrived at the tepee of the chief. On hands and knees, they crawled through the aperture, over which hung a wide strip of tanned moose-hide, soft as chamois. Bear-skins covered

the earth floor within, except in the center space, where a wood fire burned cheerfully. It was warm inside the tepee and clean and tidy. A faint odor of wood smoke mingled with the more pungent and appetizing smell of broiling meat.

Dick's first impression was that it was pleasant to be there in so warm and comfortable a place; his next, a condition accentuated, no doubt, by the boiling kettle, was a feeling of hunger and weariness. Presently curiosity induced him to examine the interior more closely. Looking about, he perceived several persons of both sexes. One was the white-haired chief, who had interviewed Sandy. Behind the chief, at a respectful distance, an aged squaw—probably the chief's wife, and beyond her an individual of such unusual appearance that Dick's eyes, resting upon him, remained there as if transfixed.

The man was emaciated, worn almost to a skeleton. From the depths of sunken sockets, burned two feverish eyes. A heavy beard-growth covered, but did not conceal, the deep hollows under the protruding cheek bones.

Dick continued to look at the man for several minutes, conscious of a steadily increasing horror. The person's forehead was ghastly white, curving up to a matted crop of straw-colored hair. Around the drooping shoulders a blanket was held in place with considerable difficulty by a thin, wasted hand.

Dick was about to turn his gaze toward something less pathetic and terrible, when the effort of holding the blanket in place, proved too much for the unfortunate creature, and it slipped down over one thin shoulder, revealing—to Dick's unutterable amazement—a crimson, tattered garment, the tunic of the royal mounted police.

Reaching out, Dick seized Toma's arm, holding it in a vice-like grip.

"May God help him! Is that Rand?"

"Yes," said Toma, his voice seeming to come from a great distance, "it Corporal Rand. All time, before I come here, I knew that. The chief him tell me all about it. Indian hunter find 'em Corporal Rand two days ago, where he lay down in the snow. Half dead, feet froze, no eat, no rifle—nothing. He get much better after while. Bye-'n'-bye mebbe all right. Get his sense back. Jus' like crazy man now."

Dick gulped down a lump in his throat, and hurried to the side of the mounted policeman. Gently, he placed one hand on the corporal's head.

"Corporal Rand."

No answer.

"Corporal Rand."

Still no answer.

"You know me, corporal. This is Dick Kent. Toma is here, too. Look up at me, corporal. Look up! We're here to help you. Look up!"

Corporal Rand looked up.

"This is Dick Kent," beseeched that young man. "Don't you understand—Dick Kent."

"Of course," muttered the mounted policeman, and his eyes burned into Dick's, "I'll remember that —certainly. Tomorrow, gentlemen, we'll divide the flour. Two to Bill, two to Thomas, two to me. That's all there is. You're welcome, I'm sure. It was my fault entirely."

Rand paused, mumbling to himself, wholly unaware that a tear had fallen from somewhere above to the thatch of straw-colored hair. His chin dropped forward until it rested on his chest. His eyes closed wearily. For a moment he seemed to doze. But only for a moment—then——

"Provoking, isn't it?" he made a pathetic attempt at a smile. "I'd begun to fear I'd lost them."

"Lost what?" gulped Dick.

"Boots," came the prompt rejoinder, "a pair of boots."

"Yes! Yes! But what else?"

The answer was disappointing:

"Three fishhooks and a ball of string. I'm very sorry, gentlemen."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RETURN TO CAMP

Two courses of action were open to Dick, yet which one to follow, he did not know. They had found Corporal Rand, but just what were they going to do with him? It was a difficult problem to solve, Dick thought. The corporal was in serious plight and required medical attention. It was a fortunate thing that they had found him. It was a fortunate thing, too, that Dr. Brady was in the vicinity and would be able to attend him. But the problem—and it was not easy to decide—was whether to bring Dr. Brady here to the village, or to take Corporal Rand over to the physician, when he and Toma returned that afternoon.

He decided finally in favor of the latter course. They would take Rand with them. Surely if he were wrapped warmly in blankets and placed in the empty sleigh, he could endure the cold, would be safe and comfortable.

Then suddenly he remembered that he needed that sleigh upon his return. That morning he had unloaded it for the purpose of pursuing the Indian

thief. Either he must secure another one here at the village, together with a team of huskies, or abandon his plan.

To his great joy and happiness, therefore, upon making inquiry, he and Toma were informed that not only would the chief gladly sell them a team and sleigh, but also would lend them three of his best drivers, men who could absolutely be depended upon to help them on their journey to Keechewan. More than that—an act of generosity, which struck both boys almost dumb with gratitude—he would present them with caribou meat and a goodly supply of frozen fish for the dogs.

In the end, Dick purchased two dog teams and sledges in place of one. They left the village just as the sun slipped down below the rim of the valley and abrupt Arctic night drew on. Across the lonely face of the hills, they speeded on their way. The Northern Lights hissed and cracked above their heads. About them beat the trembling pulse of a vast and impenetrable silence.

It was after midnight when they reached their destination, shouting and happy, storming down upon the row of chilly white tents. Their furious halloos soon brought Sandy and Dr. Brady shivering outside.

"That you, Dick?" called out Sandy's anxious voice. "Who's with you?"

"Friends," came the jubilant answer. "Stir up the fires, Sandy, we're almost famished. No!—Come over here, you and Dr. Brady. I have a surprise for you."

"What's that?"

Sandy and the physician looked down at the sleeping form, then across at Dick and Toma in perplexity.

"Guess."

"The Indian with the boots. You've half-killed him."

"Wrong. Guess again."

"One of our former dog drivers—probably Fontaine," said Dr. Brady.

"No. You're not right either. I'll give you one more chance."

"Look here," Sandy growled impatiently. "Enough of this. You're not a child any more. Who is it?"

"The man who owns the boots."

"The Indian owns the boots," exclaimed Sandy triumphantly. "I guessed right after all."

"No, you didn't. The Indian don't own the boots. He stole them."

"Pshaw! I know now," sudden light dawned upon the young Scotchman. "It's—it's a mounted policeman."

"You're right. Corporal Rand."

Breathlessly, Sandy leaned forward over the

sledge. A parka concealed the sleeper's face. Blankets, many thick folds, enwrapped him. None of the features was visible. Yet Sandy had seen enough to convince him that this man was not Rand.

"I don't see why you should try to deceive me, Dick," remonstrated Sandy. "That isn't the corporal at all. Too thin. Don't attempt to fool me."

"It is the corporal," insisted Dick. "But he's changed a lot. I met him face to face, and at first didn't even recognize him. He must have had a terrible time. He was picked up two days ago by an Indian hunter, where he'd fallen in the snow. His feet were badly frozen."

"What did he say to you?"

"Well, not much. You see, Sandy, he didn't know me. He's out of his head. I brought him over here so that Dr. Brady can help him. We'll have to take him along with us."

"We'd better not disturb him tonight," Dr. Brady cut in. "I wonder if it will be possible, when you unhitch that team of dogs, to push this sledge inside one of the tents. He might wake up if you attempt to lift him up. In the morning, I'll make my examination."

"A good idea," said Dick, moving forward to unharness the team.

Sandy followed him excitedly and touched his shoulder as he stooped forward. He pointed one arm

in the direction of the other sleighs and dog teams, where the forms of men were seen hurrying here and there through the half-light.

"What's all that?" he demanded. "Two extra teams and more men! I see you've recovered the mail sledge. Who are those fellows, Dick?"

"Those," answered Dick, happily, "are our new drivers. And the teams and sledges I purchased over at the Indian village, where we captured the thief."

"What Indian village do you mean?"

"It's up in the hills to the westward, that chain of hills you saw on this side of the Wapiti. They run parallel with the river. We followed the tracks of the thief all the way there, and overtook him just as he pulled up at the village. He's a renegade member of that tribe and the chief will punish him. He's the same man who stole Corporal Rand's boots and revolver."

Sandy straightened up, glaring about him angrily.

"Too bad we didn't find that out before."

"It's a good thing for that Indian that we didn't."

"I think I'd have shot him," Sandy bristled, "although shooting's too good for him. He ought to be flayed alive, tortured, the way they used to do."

Fires were quickly re-kindled, and a lunch prepared. It was nearly two o'clock before everyone finally retired and the camp became hushed in sleep.

On the following morning the sun had already

risen, when Toma, the first to awake, crawled wearily from his blankets into the bitter air of forty below and proceeded to arouse his comrades. Immediately there began again the monotonous routine of building fires and preparing breakfast, assembling the dogs, and making ready for the day's journey. But on this occasion, there was in evidence much more spirit and enthusiasm than at any time during the preceding two weeks. Dick was reminded of the day they had left the Mackenzie. Now and again one might hear the cheery whistle or laugh of one of the drivers. During breakfast, conversation flourished, and, after the meal, there took place a keen rivalry as to who would be the first to harness his team and take his place at the head of the column.

By mutual arrangement, it fell to the lot of Sandy to drive the team which conveyed Corporal Rand. Dr. Brady had completed his examination earlier in the morning.

"It is a pitiable case," he told the boys. "Rand's condition was caused by hardships, privations, hunger and exposure. He has a wonderful constitution, or he would never have been able to endure the half of it. I don't wonder that his mind has become unhinged. Yet, I haven't the least doubt but he'll recover his memory and his reasoning powers as his health improves."

"So you really think he'll get better?"

"Yes. I don't believe there is any question about that. But he'll never be able to take his place again in the ranks of the mounted."

A deep silence followed this statement. Both Dick's and Sandy's face fell.

"What's that? You really mean that, doctor? Will have to give up his duties—— Won't——"

Dick left the sentence incompleted as he turned beseechingly to the physician.

"No, he'll never be able to resume his duties," Brady answered gravely.

"But why?" argued Sandy. "You just said that he'd recover, would get well again. You said——"

"But I never said that he'd ever walk again," the doctor reminded him. "His feet—terrible! Frozen, bruised and cut. I may possibly have to amputate them. Even if I don't, they'll never be right again. But," and the doctor looked from one grave face to the other, "we can be mighty thankful that his life has been spared, that with proper care and attention, he'll soon recover his full mental and physical powers."

Dick turned his head to hide the tears that had come unbidden to his eyes. Sandy kicked disconsolately into a drift of snow, his gaze searching the ground. Both boys left immediately to take their places within the line of waiting teams and sledges.

"I still insist that we ought to go back and string

up that Indian who stole Corporal Rand's boots," Sandy declared savagely as he and Dick parted, the former to go to the invalid's side, the latter to the mail sledge. "The way I feel now, I could gladly tear that sneaking thief limb from limb."

"Mush! Mush!" The words floated down along the waiting line. "Mush, boys, mush!"

A creaking of sledges, the cracking of whips, a shout here and there—and they were away, an orderly column which, after the first forty or fifty yards, gathered momentum until it had gained its maximum of speed, then settled down to a steady, unchanging pace.

Whatever enjoyment the others might have had at the commencement of that exhilarating ride, it was not shared by Dick. For him the day, which had begun so propitiously, was entirely spoiled. Dr. Brady's assertion had wrung his heart. Time and time again, he turned his head and glanced back at Sandy's sledge to the helpless form lying there, and sighed bitterly.

"He may never walk again," the sentence haunted him. "A pitiable case! He'll never be able to take his place again in the ranks of the mounted."

He wondered what Cameron would say when the news had been brought to him. And Sergeant Richardson—what would he say? Rand! One of the noblest, bravest spirits that had ever come into that

land of noble and brave spirits. No longer a policeman? That seemed incomprehensible. Rand in civilian clothes? Dick snorted at the mere suggestion. To think of the service at all, was to think of Rand. Rand might have his feet frozen, yea, and his arms too, and his body hopelessly crushed; yet, notwithstanding this, in spirit, in reality, in fact, he would still be a policeman, and nothing else. A mounted policeman. A scarlet-coated, high-booted, undaunted and courageous soul.

He was still brooding over this when they pulled up at the noon hour, hilarious and joyful. They had made a record run that morning, in spite of the late start. Drivers shouted at each other as they stepped from the back of their sledges and dropped their whips. Dick moved automatically, and he, too, dropped his whip. But he did not shout. He did not even smile.

"Hello, Dick."

"Hello."

"We made good time, didn't we?" The voice was that of Dr. Brady.

"I guess we did."

"Hope this keeps up."

"Yes."

"Good gracious, boy," exclaimed Brady in alarm, "you look—why you look positively ill."

"I—I guess I'm tired," said Dick.

"Well, a good sleep for you tonight. I'll prescribe it. You've been worrying too much lately. It isn't good for you. Yet here I've come, blundering ass that I am, to sprinkle a few more gray hairs in your young head."

"I thrive on responsibility," Dick smiled a little, "so you'd better trot it out. What's wrong? Did you lose your medicine case?"

Dr. Brady laughed.

"Sometimes I almost wish that I could lose it. No, this worry isn't related to so trivial a thing as a mere medicine case. It's more important than that. I'm not fooling now, Dick. I'm in earnest. I've been thinking——"

"And the more you think, the worse you feel," interrupted Dick, a little bitterly.

"Come now, that's not very kind of you."

"I didn't mean it that way," Dick flushed. "I was referring to—to—— Oh, hang it all, doctor, I'm all upset about Rand."

CHAPTER XIX

THE END OF THE JOURNEY

Dr. Brady regarded Dick for a moment thoughtfully. There was, Dick observed, a certain hesitation about his manner.

"Before we left Fort Mackenzie," the physician began, "your Inspector Cameron called me to his office. He told me about the epidemic. I remember that there was a large map that hung on the wall behind his desk, and to this map he frequently referred. The districts affected by smallpox he had encircled in red ink. All of these were north of the Mackenzie: one straight north, several northwest, but the largest area of all northeast, in a district which he called Keechewan."

Brady paused to help Dick unharness one of his dogs, then continued:

"The circle on the map which he called Keechewan was, he explained to me, the country most dangerously affected by smallpox and contained the greatest number of people.

" 'This is to be your territory,' he told me. 'I'm

giving you a most difficult task indeed. Not only will you experience difficulty in reaching your destination, but when you do reach it, you may have trouble with the natives there. There has been an uprising among several of the Indian tribes. Relations between the white people and the Indians are strained. There has been some bloodshed. Your work will not be easy. It is sure to be dangerous, and possibly, doctor, you may never come back.'

"I asked him if anything had been done to relieve the situation. He said that he had sent one of his men, a Corporal Rand, up to that region a few days before to take charge. He was to place the district under police rule."

Dr. Brady cleared his throat.

"I guess that's about all, Dick, but you can see what I'm driving at."

"Yes," Dick answered, "I think I know what you're trying to tell me. Corporal Rand never reached his destination. Misfortune overtook him with the result that the uprising at Keechewan has never been put down."

"Exactly. The district, when we reach it, will not be under police surveillance. We can expect trouble."

During the trip from Mackenzie River barracks, Dick had learned to admire and respect the genial man whom he was conducting to Keechewan. Never had he occasion to doubt the doctor's courage. In

every emergency, he had not been found wanting. Yet in the present instance he seemed much worried. Was he really afraid? Dick decided to try him out.

"We may be risking our lives by going to Keechewan now," he said. "Do you realize that, Dr. Brady?"

"Yes, I realize it."

"I sometimes wonder," Dick evaded the other's eyes, "—I sometimes wonder if it is all worth while. Most of them are only Indians. They not only do not appreciate what we're doing for them, but more than that, they resent and scorn our help. Why not," Dick's gaze was fixed on some object on the distant horizon, "leave them to their own devices, let them suffer the consequences?"

If Dick had struck Brady in the face, the good doctor could not have been more surprised. For a moment he actually sputtered.

"Richard Kent! Do you mean that? Do you really mean to say that you contemplate such a thing —would leave those poor devils in the lurch?"

Dick raised one hand and grinned mischievously.

"There, there, doctor! Such a thought hadn't entered my mind, I assure you."

"You rascal! So you were trying me out?"

Dick laughed as he turned the dogs loose and straightened up to take Brady's arm.

"Well, what do you propose to do?"

"That's just the question I want to ask you."

"There's only one thing that I can see: Do our work and Corporal Rand's too."

"Yes, that's what I was thinking, why I came to you just now. I wondered if you had considered the situation."

"To tell you the truth, I hadn't. I've had so many other things to worry me."

"We can't be far from Keechewan mission now," stated the doctor.

"Only a few more days. Those hills you see over there in the distance must be the divide Inspector Cameron spoke of. From there it is not very far to Keechewan, provided, of course, that we don't get lost again, that our Indians know the way. We'll soon enter the barren lands."

For the time being, the subject was dropped. But Dick did not forget that interview. Often, during the next three or four days, he found himself contemplating the future with worried, thoughtful gaze. He took inventory of his munitions and his provisions. Not counting Corporal Rand, there were eight men in the party, really not a very strong force, yet he comforted himself with the thought that Corporal Rand had gone forth alone to cope with the situation.

One evening, after they had crossed the divide and had pitched their tents on a hill, dark with the shadows of approaching night, a driver drew atten-

tion to an unusual phenomenon. Far away, faint, yet plainly discernable, was the glimmering of many tiny lights. These lights blinked and beckoned to them—and a cry of elation went up from every member of the party.

"The mission!" boomed Sandy, throwing his parka high in the air. "Keechewan Mission!"

"Not more than eight miles away," adjudged Dick.

"More than that," said Toma.

"We'll arrive there tomorrow forenoon sometime," exulted the doctor.

That night, so elated were they, that they could hardly sleep. Dick and Sandy lay awake until a late hour, talking and planning. On the following morning, they rose early to waken the camp. Breakfast was hurried through, and they were on the trail nearly an hour before sunrise.

It was eleven o'clock by Dick's watch, when they entered the mission village, their eyes feasting on the row of snow-roofed cabins that fronted the winding, narrow street.

Here and there, a face appeared at a window. Now and again, some incurious form opened a door and watched them go by. But no one was abroad on the single narrow street. Had it not been for the sight of smoke, circling upward from mud chimneys, one might have thought that the village was prac-

tically deserted. There hovered about it an atmosphere of loneliness. There was something ominous about it, too, something eerie and unnatural. Dick felt somehow as if he were proceeding through a village of the dead. This feeling was accentuated by the sight of many red flags, draped over windows, hanging from doors—mute tokens of a terrible visitation.

It was a mournful little party that drew up in front of the small but picturesque Catholic Church at the far end of the winding street. They stood there as if in doubt and perplexity, looking at each other, no one volunteering to be the first to move or make a suggestion. Finally, Dick called to Dr. Brady and the two strode across to a more or less pretentious two-storey dwelling, immediately beyond the church.

A little man, dressed in the flowing robes of a monk, answered Dick's timorous knock. The priest started in surprise as he perceived who his visitors were, then his face brightened and, with a friendly gesture, he motioned them within.

"Ah!" he said, a slight but unmistakable catch in his voice. "White men! How do you do. You honor me, monsieurs. May I not bid you welcome?"

"Inspector Cameron of the mounted police sent us here to help you," explained Dick. This gentle-

man here," indicating Dr. Brady, "is an Edmonton physician. I am Dick Kent."

The priest nodded understandingly and led the way to a small but nicely furnished room, standing aside as his visitors entered. At one end of the room, a spruce log burned brightly in the mud fireplace. There were several comfortable chairs and a large bookcase, filled with row upon row of books. Near the bookcase was a desk, fitted with drawers, and on its smooth, highly-polished surface were papers, ink, and a small bronze statue of the Christ.

The atmosphere of the room was cheerful and inviting, and Dick and Dr. Brady immediately felt at ease. They took the chairs their host indicated, waiting for him to speak.

"I sent a message to Inspector Cameron," the priest began fluently, "about six weeks ago. I am glad to see that he is sending help to my stricken people. You, doctor, are especially welcome. We have done all that we possibly can to check the course of the terrible disease, but our efforts, I am sorry to inform you, have not been very successful. Many, many deaths have taken place. The villagers are almost without hope. There are many bereaved, monsieurs, much suffering and," he hesitated for a brief moment, "much complaining."

"Inspector Cameron," said Dr. Brady, "told us

about an uprising of some sort. Has the mission been attacked?"

"It has," the priest nodded. "Twice there has been a general attack, which we repulsed. Since then we have not been left in peace. Skulkers come here at night and attempt to fire our dwellings. One man, a loyal and true friend of mine, was shot down in the street. We live in apprehension. Daily, there is some new outrage to add to the complexity of our other troubles."

Dick looked across at the grave but patient face.

"We will do all in our power to help you," he encouraged him. "We will attempt to deal with these skulkers and prevent an uprising. Does most of your trouble come from outside the village?"

"For the most part, yes. There are several Indian tribes in the vicinity. At first we went among them, caring for their sick, but lately we have not been able to do this because of their warlike attitude. On the last occasion one of us went there, Father Levereaux was treated most shamefully, subjected to many indignities, and finally left outside their village. He was hurt and unconscious when we found him. He has now, I am glad to inform you, recovered from his injuries, but I fear that he has contracted smallpox. Last night, when I went to his room, he was very ill."

"I will attend him," said Dr. Brady, while Dick rose to his feet.

"There are nine men in our party," Dick said. "Perhaps there is an empty dwelling somewhere where we can stay."

"There are several places," the priest answered, "any one of which I can place at your disposal."

He, too, arose. "I will lead you there. You must rest after your journey. I can see that you are very tired. I must find you something to eat."

"No," objected Dr. Brady, "we must start to work at once."

"What do you propose to do first?" asked the priest.

"Vaccinate every person in the village. After that I'll attend to those who already have the disease."

"Have you plenty of medicines and supplies?"

"Yes."

The other's face wreathed in a smile.

"That is wonderful, monsieur. It was very kind of you to come. In my heart I thank the noble Inspector of Police. Praise God, I think we have come to the end of our trouble. I am very happy, monsieurs."

And tears of gladness slowly trickled down his cheeks.

CHAPTER XX

THE NIGHT PATROL

Dick and his party were billeted a few doors beyond the mission school in two houses, built of logs —warm and comfortable quarters. They found plenty to occupy their attention for the remainder of the day. They assisted Dr. Brady, gathered wood, delivered the mail, and in many other ways made themselves helpful and useful.

The trouble which the priest, Father Bleriot had spoken of—the impending danger of attack, the fear from the Indians in the hostile villages, not far from the mission—did not seem very imminent to them just then. But as night drew on and the villagers locked and bolted their doors and native sentinels commenced to patrol the streets, rifles in hand, the thing began to take on a different aspect.

Nearly every night, so they were informed, some depredation had been committed. A home was broken into and looted, a cabin fired, or a bullet sent crashing through one of the many darkened windows. Every morning the sentries, who seemed

powerless to prevent it, reported the night's happenings to one of the three priests, then went away with sorrowful, wagging heads, only to repeat the same performance twenty-four hours later.

Hearing of these things, the three boys and one of the Indian drivers decided to stay up that night to keep the sentinels company. Dick and the driver took up a position at the south end of the village, while Sandy and Toma patrolled the northern section, in the vicinity of the billet.

The first part of the night, from eight o'clock until midnight, passed without incident. Shortly before one, Dick and an Indian sentry entered the latter's home for a cup of tea and a bite to eat before resuming their lonely vigil. Scarcely had they seated themselves around the rough board table, when the crash of a rifle brought them to their feet. They stormed outside, looking away in the direction from which the sound had come.

The bright moonlight revealed nothing at first, but presently, less than a block away, they perceived an angry red glare and a black funnel of smoke ascending from one of the cabins.

Outside in the snow were the shivering forms of women and children, while here and there, householders rushed frantically about attempting to put out the blaze. The incendiaries had escaped. It galled Dick to realize that they had crept up right

under his nose unobserved. The shot they had heard, he soon learned, had not been fired by the invaders at all, but by one of the occupants of the burning cabin in an effort to bring help.

The cabin was doomed. Efforts to save it proved futile. The native sentry took the women and children in tow and conducted them along the street to the shelter of other cabins. Slowly, resentfully, the crowd dispersed. The sentry returned, accompanied by Sandy and Toma and the dog driver. Together they repaired to the sentry's home, where in gloomy silence they drank their delayed cup of tea and ate the hot biscuit their host set before them.

"You fellows'd better go back now," said Dick finally, rising to his feet. "Nothing else may happen tonight, but it's wise to be on our guard."

Sandy grinned as he pushed his empty cup back from the edge of the table.

"I don't want to rub it in, Dick," he remarked, "but that was a good joke on you. The cabin that is burning down isn't more than a block from here. Whoever set fire to it must have slipped right past you. What were you doing, Dick?"

Dick flushed, but did not reply.

"Didn't you see anyone?" persisted Sandy.

"No. They caught us napping all right. But be mighty sure, Sandy, that they don't come in on

your side before the night's over. Well, good luck to you. I'll be along before daybreak."

Sandy and Toma departed, and again Dick and his two companions took up their lonely patrol. This time, however, at Dick's suggestion, they separated, each having under his surveillance a certain definite section of the village. Up and down, forth and back, through that cold and stilly night, their moccasined feet beat across the snow.

Then, suddenly, for the second time that night, a shot rang out. There came the sound of crashing glass and a woman's startled scream.

It had all happened right in Dick's beat, scarcely fifty yards away. Instantly he was alert and ready. This time instead of rushing away toward the cabin which had been fired on he cut obliquely across the street in the direction the invader would have taken in making his get-away. He fairly flew across the snow, dodged between two low buildings and came out on the farther side, panting for breath.

In the path of moonlight in the cleared space ahead, he saw a fleeting form, and, without even pausing for breath, started forward in swift pursuit.

Dick was a fast runner, as he had proved to his satisfaction many times before. In the present instance, he put all his heart and strength in the race. He exerted every ounce of energy. But if he was

fleet of foot, excelling in this particular line of physical endeavor, so was his opponent. Try as he would, Dick seemed unable to gain upon him. Between buildings, across fields, over a narrow footbridge that crossed a brook, then along a trail that threaded its way south from the village, the two forms flew.

After a time Dick began to gain slowly upon his quarry. Foot at a time, he drew closer. He saw the Indian, tall and lithe like himself, cast one worried glance over his shoulder, see that he was being overtaken, then hurl his rifle to the snow, free from which encumbrance, he quickly regained his former advantage.

Somewhat reluctantly, Dick followed suit. He still carried his revolver at his belt. He puffed as he ran. The blood throbbed in his ears. The continued exertion had begun to tell. On and on he raced, slowly shortening the distance that separated them. Thirty yards! Twenty yards! He was only a rod or two behind him now, gaining at every leap. But with every leap his heart felt as if it would burst within his body. Finally, in despair, he had commenced to slacken his pace, when he saw the runner ahead stumble over some obstruction in the path and fall heavily.

When the Indian rose choking to his knees, Dick stood over him, revolver in hand.

"I've got you, you human greyhound," he panted. "You can come back with me now. The race is over."

The Indian, of course, did not understand a word of English. He rose, brushing the snow from his garments.

"Come back with me, brother of the deer," ordered Dick in Cree. "Come over on the path here and start back toward the village."

His captive obeyed. They marched back, puffing like two locomotives, one a little shamefacedly, the other exultantly.

"You run very fast," said Dick admiringly, as he drove the other on, feeling very magnanimous in his victory.

The other grunted.

"You have feet more swift than a wolf," Dick went on. "It was unfortunate for you that you fell."

Again the Indian grunted.

"Why do you come bothering these people?" Dick took a new tack. "They have done nothing to hurt you. They are your friends. Why do you attack them and set fire to their homes and send bullets crashing through their windows?"

For the third time the Indian grunted. Dick gave up. He could learn nothing from this sullen fellow. Very well then, he could go back and cool his heels behind the guarded door of some village dwelling.

They reached the place where Dick had thrown down his gun, and, farther on, he also picked up the weapon belonging to his prisoner. Not long afterward they made their appearance in the village, where they were met by a number of people, including Sandy and Toma.

Ordinarily Sandy would have come forward to compliment Dick upon his achievement, but this time, for some reason, he refrained. And Sandy's appearance and behavior were strange. He stood and stared at Dick almost dully. Toma's atitude was equally peculiar and inexplicable.

"Well," said Dick, "I've brought him back."

No one replied.

"Sandy," stated Dick, "this is the Indian who fired that shot a while ago. I ran him down. What do you think we'd better do with him?"

"I don't know," Sandy muttered, in a voice that might have come from the depths of some subterranean vault. "I don't know, Dick. This is terrible. What will we do?"

Dick flushed angrily.

"Do," he snapped out testily, "why we'll do what we've been doing for the last two months—the best we can. What makes Toma stand there like a lump on a log, eyeing me so queerly? What have I done? Why, you all act as if I had committed a crime, in-

stead of bringing this man back to answer for his misdeeds."

Sandy emerged from his despondency at this unexpected verbal attack, the light of battle in his eyes.

"What have you done?" he demanded sharply. "What have you done? Well, I'll tell you. You've done just what the rest of us have done. Made a fool out of yourself. Permitted yourself to become a dupe—a—sucker."

"A sucker! See here. I've had about enough of this. I——"

But Sandy went inexorably on:

"Father Bleriot and Dr. Brady have been captured."

"But, Sandy!——" gasped Dick.

"They've been captured, I tell you."

"But look here, Sandy——"

"Keep quiet, will you, and let me finish. Do you know why this Indian fired that shot?"

"No."

"To draw all the guards to this end of the village so that another attacking party could swoop down from the other side and play general havoc. They got Brady and Father Bleriot and two of the Indian servants. No one was there to stop them. They had plenty of time to get away. Toma and I and the other guards came down here, while you were chas-

ing away across country after your friend. Now, I ask you, what are we to do about it?"

Dejectedly, Dick put one of his rifles on the ground and sat down upon it. He was breathing hard, but not from the effects of the race. His triumph had been short-lived. He leaned forward and put his head in his hands.

"The villagers are panic stricken," Sandy informed him. "They're about done for. They've lost all hope, and I don't think they're to be blamed very much either."

Dick raised his eyes. A crowd had gathered round him. It was a silent crowd. Dejection showed in every face. Somewhere, at the edge of the gathering a woman was crying softly. Dick staggered to his feet.

"Her husband was one of the servants the Indians took," Sandy explained. "Everyone here believes that we've seen the last of those four men. They'll all be murdered."

Dick found his voice.

"Does anyone know which way that attacking party left?" he demanded.

"There are plenty who can testify to that. They went north into the barrens."

"Is there an Indian village up that way?"

"Yes, about four miles from here. What do you suggest doing, Dick?"

"We can do one thing only," Dick's tone was tragic. "I'll call for a party of volunteers and set out in pursuit." He raised his voice: "Come now, who will be the first to go with me?"

Toma stepped forward.

"I go," he said.

Sandy was scarcely a foot behind him.

"I'll be one."

A moment's hesitation, then the tall form of a villager drew away from the crowd.

"I will accompany my white brothers," he asserted.

Others also came forward. By ones and twos they shambled up—tragic-eyed men, frail, hollow-cheeked youths, white-haired veterans of a hundred trap-lines. Steadily they came and took their places at Dick's side.

CHAPTER XXI

DISASTER LOOMS

Four miles is not far. In the north country, where distance plays such an important part in the lives of the inhabitants, four miles would be accounted but a step, a unit of space hardly worth considering. Yet to Dick and his party, who had set out in pursuit of the Indian invaders, it seemed a long way indeed. It was a weary trail and a hard one. It was fraught with danger, with grave foreboding.

It seemed to the young leader, as they fared forth across that ghastly moonlit field, that his life had been spent on trails. Daily he walked along some trail. At night he slept beside one. When chill morning broke across a bleak snow-covered land, it was only to resume that never-ending, continuous trek.

It was a sort of Nemesis that haunted him. Somehow he couldn't get away from it. The trail!—— It was there always. It beckoned to him. It defied him. It led him wearily, doggedly on to new dangers and disasters.

On the night in question, the four miles seemed inconceivably long. The feet of his party dragged. A moody silence hung about them. No one laughed. Conversation had ceased. Behind him came the monotonous crunch, crunch, crunch of scores of snowshoes, beating out a path. Crunch, crunch, crunch—tired, laggard feet moved hesitatingly, moved fearfully, ready at the slightest pretext to turn and flee.

Neither Dick nor his two chums believed that in case of an attack, any of the Indians, comprising their party, would make a stand. They were too fearful. In the final crisis, so Dick believed, he would be forced to depend solely upon his two friends and himself. Yet in numbers there is strength. Their imposing array would be sure to impress the enemy.

They reached the village. They bore down upon it, forty strong, shouting their defiance. With their rifles ready, they entered the outskirts, laggard steps becoming more laggard, frightened faces becoming more frightened as the crisis approached. They were offered no resistance. Could it be that the village was asleep? A few huskies sniffed at their heels. A papoose cried in one of the tepees they passed. Still they went on.

In the brilliant star-sprinkled sky a few clouds were visible. One particularly dark cloud passed

across the moon. Shadows fell athwart the tepees. It was darker now. The forms of Dick's followers became shrouded in gloom. Along the white snow surface crept a huge dark stain, an immensity of shadow that blotted the earth.

The tepees were black blotches now against a dark background. Out of this obscurity, coming as unexpectedly as a fire-siren, shrieking its warning, there rose a blood-curdling, hideous yell. Dick literally froze in his tracks. A cold sweat broke out upon his face. He had scarcely the strength to stand upon his tottering legs.

The yell was followed by the cracking of rifles, the whining of bullets. Appalled, his men drew back. For a brief moment they stood their ground, then broke and fled in confusion. The retreat became a rout. Panic spread, rifles were hurled to one side, and a few minutes later Dick's valiant supporters disappeared from view, swallowed up in the semi-darkness.

Dick saw the absolute futility of attempting anything further that night. Moving more leisurely, he and his two chums followed his defeated column. Again the trail oppressed him. Hope had gone glimmering. He had reached the end of the road. He heard Sandy speaking in mournful tones:

"Well, I guess there isn't much we can do now. It's all over. I wouldn't give one whoop for Dr.

Brady's chances now, or the priest's either. What do you think about it, Toma?"

For once the young Indian was at a loss to know what to say. He shook his head and walked on beside them.

"I'm tired of it all," said Dick. "Our luck has deserted us. There used to be a time, Sandy, when we could stumble through difficulties blindly. But I'm afraid that that time has passed. We're up against a solid rock wall. We can't scale it. It's too high for our puny strength. We're helpless."

"And yet," said Sandy, almost reverently, "Corporal Rand came up here single-handed to accomplish what we have failed to do with forty men. Have you stopped to think about that?"

"Yes, but Corporal Rand is licked too."

"The trail did that. I'm willing to bet that if Corporal Rand were here now, he'd dare to go back to that Indian village alone, and would probably be successful too."

"I realize that. But how do they do it? It's a thing I've often wondered at."

"I can't explain it myself," said Sandy, "unless it is the awe in which they are held. You see, Dick, all the people who live in this north country know what wonderful men they are, how brave and determined. They're afraid of them. But it's something more than fear. It goes deeper than that. It's

—it's—— I can't tell you what it is. It isn't exactly awe or reverence or fear. Perhaps it is a mixture of all these things. I really can't tell you."

They struggled on, soon reaching the village, where they were met by Father Michaud, who was now in charge of the mission. Father Michaud carried a lantern. He was a much older man than either of his two associates. He held the lantern out before him, and as the boys came closer, peered up anxiously in their faces.

"Ah, monsieur, is it not terrible. Ees everyone safe? Are there no dead? So terrible—so terrible!" he lamented. "Even from here I hear those awful shouts an' ze sound of ze rifles. Did you make a brave ree-sistance?"

"How could we?" answered Sandy. "Everybody ran away. At the first sound of firing, our brave little army vanished like a flock of frightened sheep."

"An' you saw nothing of ze Father Bleriot an' ze good Dr. Brad-ee?"

"No. We saw nothing of them."

"Et ees so terrible," wailed the priest. "Tomorrow will you go again?"

"I'll have to think that over," Dick replied. "But what is the use. If you can supply me with some really brave and courageous men, I'll undertake to bring the good father and Dr. Brady back."

"Ah, but my people, zey are so prostrate, so heavy with grief. Ze spirit has gone out of them."

"Well, I'm not surprised at that," said Sandy, a little more charitable.

"Et ees to be regretted zat ze policeman ees seeck. He ees a wonderful man, zat Corporal Rand. Nothing on earth can stop zat man."

"What did I tell you," whispered Sandy, nudging Dick's arm. "He knows it too."

"What will monsieur do now?"

"First of all, we'll have something to eat and a few hours sleep. After that, we can make our plans. To be perfectly frank, Father Michaud, I don't know what to do."

Dick's shoulders seemed to droop as he made the assertion. He was feeling the weight of his responsibilities, had reached the point where it seemed impossible to go on.

And then, suddenly, there flashed through his mind the grim figure of the Inspector of Police. The steel-gray eyes were regarding him.

"If I didn't have implicit faith in you, I wouldn't send you on this expedition."

Implicit faith in him! Yet he wondered if Cameron, knowing of the odds against them, would have held out hope for their ultimate success.

"Et ees too bad zat Corporal Rand ees ill," Father Michaud repeated. "Zey would be afraid of him,

monsieur. Zey see ze mounted police an' zey are afraid."

Suddenly Dick had an idea. He turned quickly to the priest.

"Father Michaud, where is the man I captured earlier in the night? Where is he now?"

"In one of ze cabins. Zey have put a guard over him."

"Father, will you lead me to that cabin?"

The priest nodded. He commenced hobbling down the road. They followed him and turned into the narrow street, with the row of cabins on either side. They hurried on through the dim light of early morning, presently drawing up before a low structure, in front of which stood a native, a rifle clutched in his hands.

"Open the door," said Dick in Cree. "I wish to see the prisoner."

They entered the dark interior. The guard struck a match and lit the tiny taper that had been placed on the mantle above the fireplace.

In front of the fire, rolled in a blanket, which had been provided him, lay Dick's former track-mate. Toma aroused him by shaking his shoulders none too gently, yanking him to an upright position. The man daubed at his eyes, looking sleepily about him.

"What is your name?" asked Dick in Cree.

"Tawanish."

"All right, Tawanish, I'm about to release you. You can go back to your own people."

"Dick, are you mad?" suddenly interposed Sandy. "Have you taken leave of your senses? Do you realize what you are saying? No, Dick, we will hold him here as a hostage. They have Dr. Brady and Father Bleriot. We have this man."

Dick turned almost angrily upon his chum.

"Please, Sandy, don't interfere. I know what I'm doing."

He turned again to the Indian.

"Tawanish, I am sending you back to your own people. You can go free."

"It is very good of my brother," stammered the Indian, blinking at his liberator.

"You will carry a message to your people," Dick went on. "Do you understand that, Tawanish—carry a message. You must remember what I say, else it will go hard with you and them."

"What is the message?" Tawanish asked.

"You must tell them," Dick replied, choosing his words carefully, "—you must tell them, Tawanish, that the mounted police have arrived. Corporal Rand is here. Tell them that they must release the good father and the white medicine man. As soon as you return and tell them this, they must release these two men and give them a convoy back to this village. Do you understand what I have told you?"

"Yes," answered the Indian. "I understand."

"This Corporal Rand," Dick resumed, "is a terrible man. He is one of the greatest among all of the mounted police. If you do not comply with his request, his vengeance will be sure and certain. Do you follow me, Tawanish?"

"I understand what you have said. It shall be done."

"Very well," said Dick. "Know you then that if the good father and the white doctor do not return to us before the time of the noonday sun, Corporal Rand will proceed to your village."

Sandy and Toma stared in open-mouthed amazement.

"You're mad!" sputtered Sandy.

"If you will come with us, Tawanish, I will give you back your gun. Then you can start at once."

They filed from the room. Outside Dick dismissed the guard, then led the way to his own billet, where he had left his captive's rifle. Extracting the cartridges, he handed it over to Tawanish.

"Go," said Dick, "and give your chief and your people my message."

The Indian's departure was sudden and abrupt. He streaked for the door. Father Michaud touched Dick's arm.

"I hope," he declared, "zat you have not made a

serious meestake, monsieur. Do you think zey will heed your request?"

Dick sat down on the edge of his bunk, under the accusing gaze of his two chums.

"I don't know," he answered. "There's a chance."

The pent up rage and anger, which had been seething within Sandy's breast, suddenly broke forth.

"You fool! You fool! Of all the unthinking, crazy actions I've ever witnessed, this is the worst. Do you realize what you've done? Do you know what will happen now? Wouldn't listen to me, would you? Nor Toma? Nor Father Michaud? You—you——"

Sandy's tirade ended in a choking and sputtering wholly unintelligible.

"What have I done?" asked Dick.

"You haven't the sense to see it, so I'll tell you. The Indians might hesitate about killing Dr. Brady and Father Bleriot as long as we had one of their own people here. They'd be afraid that if they did commit such an act, we'd retaliate by taking the life of that Indian."

He paused, clearing his throat.

"Now, by your colossal blunder, you have made the way easy for them. They can kill them with perfect impunity. Dick, how could you be so thoughtless. Your plan won't work. You acted on impulse.

I'm sure," more kindly, "that if you'd paused to reason it all out in your mind, you'd never have taken that step."

Dick had nothing to say. It did seem as if Sandy were right. It was an awful moment.

"Well," said Sandy, "we might as well go to bed. There is nothing more that we can do now. Come on, Dick, let's tumble in."

The priest turned away quietly and left the room. They could hear the crunch of his footsteps outside. Toma and Sandy sat down and commenced pulling off their moccasins. But Dick did not stir. His hopeless, tragic eyes stared into the fire.

CHAPTER XXII

WHEN MOMENTS ARE ETERNITY

SANDY consulted his watch. His face was anxious. Little worried lines showed under his eyes and at the corners of his mouth.

"It's eleven o'clock, Dick," he announced. "One hour to go. If they aren't here by twelve, they won't come at all."

"Yes," said Dick miserably. "Eleven o'clock. But they may come, Sandy."

The suspense was difficult to endure. In the last half hour, Sandy's watch had been jerked from his pocket no less than seven times. The three boys sat in their billet and marked the slow passing of time. All through the morning they had experienced a nervous tension, which was becoming rapidly more and more acute. Toma paced up and down the floor, paying little heed to what his two chums said. Occasionally, he looked out through one of the frosted windows, straining his ears for the shout that would announce the safe return of the two captives.

In his heart, Toma half-believed that Dick's plan

would work. He knew the awe and reverence in which the mounted police were held. If Dr. Brady and Father Bleriot were not sent back, it would be because the Indians had come to the conclusion that Dick's statement regarding Corporal Rand was merely a bluff.

Sandy's watch ticked off the seconds. Dick stepped forward to stir up the fire. There came a timid knock at the door.

It was Father Michaud. He shuffled through the doorway, his robes rustling about him, his thin bare hands rubbing each other to restore their sluggish circulation.

"Ah, monsieurs," he broke forth, "I have slept but ill. Et ees most difficult theese slow waiting. Do you not think, monsieurs? All night I worry veree much. Zen I pray, monsieurs. Et ees a great help."

Sandy pulled forward a chair for their unhappy visitor.

"Sit down, father. Take a place here close to the fire."

"*Merci.* You are kind, monsieur."

He half-turned in his chair.

"Do you think zey will come?" he asked, addressing Dick.

"I do not know." Dick's face was tragic. "I'm afraid, father, they may not come."

For twenty minutes the priest kept alive a failing

conversation. Occasionally, Sandy consulted his watch. Time slipped by.

"Twenty minutes to twelve," said Sandy, at the end of what seemed like an eternity.

Toma continued his pacing back and forth. Dick sat huddled in his chair. The priest rambled on.

"Ten minutes to twelve," Sandy informed them.

Dick could endure the suspense no longer. He rose, crossed the room, and flung open the door. A cold draft of air whirled in across the floor. Toma hurried over to where Dick stood and peered over his shoulder. They heard a shout. It brought Sandy and Father Michaud to their feet. Villagers were running in the street. A crowd had gathered.

"They—they've come back," blurted Dick, darting through the door, Toma right behind him. They joined the throng.

In the center of the crowd stood, not Dr. Brady and Father Bleriot, but—and Dick's heart sank at the sight of him—their captive of the night before. In his hand he waved something—something white. With Toma acting as his interference, and employing football tactics, Dick plunged through, gaining a place by the side of the messenger. He seized the piece of birch bark and scanned it eagerly. It was covered thickly with Indian signs and symbols.

"Toma," cried Dick, "can you make this out? Tell me, what does it say here?"

Toma took the birch bark in his own trembling hands, studied it for a moment, then in a fit of anger threw it at his feet, where with one foot he trampled it in the snow.

"What does it say?" Dick's voice was shrill, plaintive.

"It say," stormed Toma, "that you tell 'em big lie about mounted police; that Corporal Rand no come here at all. They make you big laugh."

At that instant Dick bethought him of the messenger. Defy him, would they? Well, he'd see about that. At least, he'd seize their messenger. He sprang forward with this purpose in view, but the Indian slipped under his arm, dodged behind the tall figure of one of the gaping natives, and before anyone could prevent it, had made his escape. At that moment, Sandy came plowing through the ranks of the spectators, shouting hoarsely.

"Where is Dr. Brady?"

"He didn't come back."

"What's all this rumpus about then?"

"That Indian prisoner I released last night came back with a defiant message, which says that they, the Indians, don't believe that the policeman is here."

"And the messenger?"

"He slipped away from me."

Dick ordered the crowd back with an authoritative

wave of his arm. His feeling of hopelessness and despair had given place to anger, to a consuming, burning rage. The Indians had defied him openly. They were making a fool out of him. They had called his bluff.

It occurred to him that he could recruit another attacking party and go to the doctor's rescue. But the memory of his experience of the night before still rankled in his mind. No—if he were to accomplish anything, it would be through his own efforts, and with the assistance of only Sandy and Toma. He beckoned to his chums.

"Let's go back to the billet," he suggested, "and talk this thing over."

As his two friends came up, he linked his arms in theirs and began:

"I can see now, Sandy, that I have made a terrible mistake. I've got myself in a hole and may never be able to get out of it. Just the same, I don't intend to give up. I'm not licked yet. I want to know if you boys will stand behind me."

"Yes, Dick, we're with you," Sandy assured him.

"You depend on us," added Toma.

Back in the billet again, they commenced to lay their plans. On the previous night they had tried, by the superiority of their numbers, to intimidate the enemy. They had failed. Now they would employ

stealth. That night, they decided, the three of them would creep up to the Indian village and attempt a rescue.

"We may be successful," said Sandy. "We have a chance, at any rate."

"Our last chance, too," declared Dick. "If we fail in this, it is all over."

A little later, Sandy went over to the mission store to purchase a few supplies. Toma remained behind, his head bowed deep in thought. Silence had come to the room, broken only by the breathing of the boys and the crackling of the logs in the fireplace. After a time, Dick rose.

"I suppose we'd better be thinking about lunch."

Of a sudden, Toma darted to his feet. He had sprung from his chair so quickly, that Dick, who was looking at him, could scarcely follow the lightning movement. Toma hugged himself in ecstacy. He seized Dick in a smothering embrace, whirling him around and around.

"Dick, listen me," he shouted. "I know what we do now. I think it all out. It come to me in flash. Sandy no need go at all. Jus' you, me go. We go this afternoon. Hurry—you follow me quick!"

Blindly Dick followed the other. He trotted down the street in the wake of his excited chum, wondering what it was all about. They hurried past the

mission school, reaching, finally, a low dwelling, into which, without a moment's hesitation, without even the preliminary of a knock, Toma darted.

It was the house which harbored Corporal Rand. Upon the afternoon of their arrival, the policeman had been placed here with an Indian woman in attendance. He was here now, sitting propped up in a chair in front of a pleasant fire.

"Good morning, corporal," both boys greeted him.

The policeman turned his head. As he did so, the boys stopped abruptly. A remarkable change had taken place in him. His cheeks were fuller now. His eyes burned less brightly. The heavy beard-growth had been removed. He smiled a wan greeting.

"Dick and Toma, as I live! Where did you come from?"

"We have a billet down the street," answered Dick.

"Ah, yes; and I have been ill. Very ill. I can remember—it is so difficult to remember—but I was on the trail, wasn't I? A difficult trail. And what is the name of this place, Dick?"

"Keechewan."

"Keechewan! Keechewan!" Corporal Rand repeated the name. "It sounds familiar, doesn't it?"

Toma was beside him now—standing very close,

looking down into the sick man's eyes. He suddenly stooped and whispered something into Rand's willing ears, then drew back smiling.

"It is all right," he announced to Dick, who had come closer. "Corporal Rand he say all right. Him willing we go. We must hurry very fast, Dick. You go back to billet an' pretty soon I go there too."

And almost before he realized it, Toma had seized his arm and was dragging him toward the door.

"Quick!" he commanded. "You go back to billet. I know place where I find two horses. You get us something to eat in plenty hurry. Two rifles, cartridge belts, revolvers—— You work quick—plenty fast. So me too."

"But Toma," protested his bewildered companion, "I don't see. I don't know—— What——"

"No time ask 'em questions now. Do like I say. Quick! Hurry!"

Through the open doorway Dick was bundled, pushed, treated somewhat roughly, considering that Toma was his friend. Outside in the chill air, he had started to protest again, but the door was slammed in his face.

"You be good fellow. Hurry now!" the inexorable voice boomed at him through the heavy barrier. "I be along mebbe eight, ten minutes."

There was nothing left for him to do except obey. Shaking his head, wondering what new form of in-

sanity had seized hold of his friend, he wheeled about and struck back towards the billet. There he gathered up a bundle of food, secured the rifles, cartridges and revolver—exactly as he had been instructed—and sat down to wait.

In a remarkably short time Toma appeared. His coming was heralded by the clatter of hooves. Dick heard a voice calling to him.

Toma did not even dismount, as Dick thrust his head through the doorway.

"Is that my horse?" asked Dick, feeling a little foolish.

"Your horse. Bring 'em rifles an' grub an' jump up into saddle quick."

Sandy was just coming down the street, his arms loaded with provisions, when the two horses, their flanks quivering, nostrils dilated, leaped from the trodden snow around the doorway and galloped away like mad.

They turned off on the north trail, whirling past an open-mouthed sentry, who, in his hurry to get out of the way, stepped back in a huge snowdrift and sat down. They streaked over a narrow bridge, spanning a creek, shot up the steep embankment on the farther side and, at break-neck speed, headed for the open country in the direction of the Indian village. It was not until they were two miles out, that Toma drew in his horse.

"We stop here for a few minutes," he informed Dick.

"What for?"

Toma produced a bulky package, deftly opened and shook out—a frayed crimson tunic of the mounted police.

"What's that for?" Dick gasped.

"You put 'em on—quick! You Corporal Rand now. Indians be much afraid when we ride up."

Trembling, Dick removed his own coat and put on the crimson garment. They rode on again.

It was all that Dick could do to sit erect in his saddle, much less simulate a quiet determination, a bravery he did not feel. The two miles dwindled into one. The remaining mile to the village—how quickly did it seem to slip away past them, bringing them closer and closer to that unwavering row of brown tepees.

Their horses went forward at a walk. From the tiny dwellings emerged human figures. Malevolent eyes were watching them. Dick caught the flash of sunlight on some bright object, probably a rifle barrel, and he grew rigid in the saddle, instinctively reaching toward the holster at his side. Toma detected the motion and soberly shook his head.

"No do that," he advised promptly. "Mounted police never pull gun 'til other fellow get ready to

use his. What you say we make horses go fast? Gallop right up to village."

Dick approved the suggestion. For one thing, a flying mark is more difficult to hit. Another thing, it gave a touch of realism to their bluff. It was exactly what a mounted policeman would do.

So, when less than fifty yards from the nearest tepee, they dug their heels into their ponies' flanks and cantered briskly up. They approached the first two tepees and passed them without mishap. But Dick's heart was in his throat now. His cheeks were drained of color. With increasing difficulty, he kept his place astride his plunging horse.

Indians were pouring out of their domiciles, like disturbed bees from a hive. A low murmur came to the boys' ears. Form after form they flashed by, scarcely conscious of where they were going until, by chance, they perceived that toward the center of the encampment there had gathered an excited crowd of natives, who were watching their approach. Toward this crowd, they made their way at a quick gallop.

Dick felt a little dazed as they came to a sudden halt. The Indians had fallen back, yet did not disperse. Deep silence greeted them. It was so deeply and intensely quiet that Dick could almost believe that the Indians were statues of stone.

He tried to speak, but his tongue clove in his mouth. Fear had settled upon him and he seemed powerless to shake it off. At the crucial moment, when everything depended upon his actions and deportment, he was failing miserably. Fortunately, he had the good sense to see this and tried desperately to control himself. He sat up more rigidly in the saddle, his mittened hands clenched.

"Make 'em talk," whispered Toma.

Dick flung up one arm in a commanding gesture.

"Bring the two white men here at once," he ordered.

Then suddenly his gaze seemed to waver. The crowd became a blur—a shadowy something before his eyes. In their place rose up the stern figure of Inspector Cameron—the worn, austere face, the steel-gray eyes, the decisive chin. Again Dick threw up his arm. A strange calmness pervaded him.

"Bring them here," he repeated in a voice of gathering impatience.

A murmur rose from the crowd. Suddenly it fell back, hesitated for a brief interval, then hurried away to do the white chief's bidding. The tension had relaxed. As he slowly turned in his saddle to meet the gaze of his friend, a ray of sunlight fell across Toma's face.

"Bye-'n'-bye they come!" he cried happily.

CHAPTER XXIII

BACK AT THE MISSION

"You've won, Dick. Dr. Brady says that you were absolutely wonderful. The way you sat on your horse, the way you ordered that crowd of natives about—your calmness, your courage. You were every inch a policeman!"

Dick laughed.

"I wonder what Dr. Brady would say if he knew the truth. I wonder what he would say if he knew that I was quaking inside like a jelly-fish. It is true that I sat on my horse, but the credit is due the horse, not me. If he had moved as much as one front leg, he'd have shaken me out of the saddle. Our cause would have been lost."

"Come! Come! You're fooling, Dick."

"Not at all. I was never more frightened in my life, and I never want to be as badly frightened again. I was trembling like a leaf. When the chief brought out Father Bleriot and Dr. Brady and turned them over to us, I very nearly collapsed."

"But the Indians were frightened too. They were afraid of you."

"Perhaps they were. Everyone was more or less frightened, I guess, except Toma. Cool! Honestly I think he enjoyed it. He egged me on, encouraged me. I never would have had the nerve to enter that village if it hadn't been for him. There's a young man, Sandy, who was born without fear. He doesn't know what it means."

Sandy rose and threw another log on the fire. Then he rubbed the palms of his hands together and grinned.

"Well, I'll grant that. He doesn't. He loves action and excitement. He eats it. I suppose he's off somewhere now, worrying because we haven't much left here to do."

"I know where he is," laughed Dick. "He went back to the Indian village with Dr. Brady. Brady is finishing his work there this afternoon. Toma is his interpreter."

A moment of silence. Then:

"Dick, were you over to see Corporal Rand this morning?"

"Yes."

"Better, isn't he?"

"Much better. I never saw anyone improve so rapidly."

"But you didn't talk with Dr. Brady. Did he tell you, Dick—did you hear——"

In his excitement, Sandy pulled forward a chair

and plumped himself into it, putting both hands on Dick's knees.

"Dr. Brady admits that he was wrong. His first examination was—er—well, a little hasty. Those feet, for example. Bad, of course, but——"

"Do you mean to tell me he'll walk?"

"Exactly."

"Will be well enough to return to his duties?"

"Dr. Brady believes so now. He was quite enthusiastic this morning. It'll take months, of course —months before he'll be around again. First, he must go to Edmonton and have an operation—skin grafting and all that sort of thing."

"And his mind is all right too?"

"Yes. Almost."

"Almost!" snorted Dick. "You don't mean that, surely. Why, he was perfectly rational last night, when I had a talk with him. He remembered everything. He told me about his troubles on the trail. He asked me if we were intending to take the Keechewan mail back with us. We had a long talk together. His mind is as bright as a new silver American dollar. What made you say that?"

Sandy rose again and pushed back his chair. He walked over and stood with his back to the fire.

"It's getting colder, Dick."

"Look here, you gay young deceiver, you didn't answer my question."

Sandy looked up blankly.

"Eh, what? Question?"

"Yes. My question. Why do you think that Corporal Rand hasn't fully recovered his mental powers?"

"He hasn't—quite," Sandy wagged his head dolefully. "He sometimes suffers from hallucinations. Dr. Brady and I both noticed it."

"What are they?"

"There was one in particular. It would have amused me, only I feel so sorry for him. He's—he's—well, he thinks he's going to be placed under arrest. Can you imagine anything so absurd? And by Inspector Cameron, too. He's really worrying about it."

Dick's roar of laughter echoed to every part of the room. Tears of merriment chased each other down his cheeks.

"I don't think that is so very funny," Sandy declared with great dignity. "You ought to pity the man."

"You chump! You chump!" howled Dick. "Why that—that isn't an hallucination; it's a fact. Corporal Rand may be arrested. He probably will be, but I don't believe Cameron will be very severe with him. Not this time."

"What's he done?" blinked Sandy.

"Disobeyed orders. He came up here against the inspector's wishes. You see, Cameron intended to come himself."

"Oh," said Sandy, much relieved, "the inspector has probably forgotten all about it."

"Not he! Cameron never forgets."

"But he won't be hard on him."

"Of course not. He'll impose a light fine along with a severe lecture. Then he'll reach in his pocket and give Rand the money to pay the fine."

Sandy laughed.

"Why don't you tell Rand that? I think it will relieve his mind."

"Guess I will." Dick rose. "I'll take a run over there now and cheer him up."

Dick had reached the door, when Sandy called him back.

"I say, Dick."

"Yes, Sandy, what is it?"

"Remember the night when you released the Indian—sent him back to his people with that message?"

"Yes, I remember."

"I—I called you some names, Dick. I'm sorry about that. I guess I was a bit angry and overbearing. You'll overlook it, won't you?"

Dick took his chum's hand and gripped it firmly.

"Why—I'd forgotten about it. Anyway, it's all right. Everything is all right," he smiled.

"And you're all right, too," declared Sandy.

Which, considering everything, was as fine a compliment as Dick had ever received.

CHAPTER XXIV

A TREK HOMEWARD

A DOG train waited outside the Keechewan Mission. It was a long train—ten teams of malemutes and huskies—an impatient train, too, for not only the dogs but the drivers as well, waited impatiently for the word of command that would set it in motion. Brake-boards were passed firmly into the snow, the feet holding them in place becoming cramped as the moments passed and still the leader did not appear.

Presently a door creaked open and a tall young man, laden with two heavy mail sacks, emerged to the street. It was Dick Kent—and he was smiling. Behind Dick came Dr. Brady and the cassocked figure of a Catholic priest, Father Bleriot. The two last named persons walked side-by-side, talking and laughing. The priest's right arm was thrust in friendly fashion through that of the physician's, and, as the three figures came to a halt directly opposite the sledge, to which a team of beautiful gray malemutes were harnessed, the doctor declared:

"So we're to go back at last. I see you have everything ready, Dick. Nothing to do now except pull our worthless freight out of here."

"Monsieur does himself an injustice," beamed the priest. "You have reason to feel proud—you and your friends. Hope and happiness and tranquility have come again to Keechewan."

"Have you any message that I can take to Inspector Cameron?" Dick asked.

"It is there in the sack," Father Bleriot pointed to one of the mail pouches Dick had placed in the empty sleigh. "A letter, monsieur, written from my heart and sealed with tears of thankfulness. All one night I sat and wrote that letter, page after page, to the good inspector, and when I had finished, monsieur, I found that I had expressed not even one small part of what I wished to say."

"Cameron will understand," Dr. Brady reassured him.

"And now you go," said the priest regretfully. "You embark upon a difficult journey. You go south without even a pause to rest."

"It will not seem so far this time," stated Dick, turning toward his sledge. "Well, thank you Father, for your kindness and hospitality. We must go now. Dr. Brady, you've worked hard, so we're giving you the place of honor here with the mail."

They shook hands again. Dr. Brady was bun-

dled into the sleigh. At a signal from Dick, impatient feet were lifted from brake-boards, whips cracked, and the train whirled away amid a flurry of fine snow. Father Bleriot, a somewhat lonely figure, stood and waved his farewell, his expressive dark eyes lighting with satisfaction, as there came to him the cheers of scores of happy householders, who lined the streets to watch the party go by.

Speeding southward, the dog train soon left the village behind. The bleak landscape of the Barrens settled around them. Rolling drifts of crusted snow stretched away to the horizon. The wind shrieked up from behind, a cold wind which froze the hot breath of the huskies, and painted their lean, gray flanks with a white coat of frost.

Hour after hour, then day after day, the cavalcade bore on. The Barrens vanished. A streak of dun-colored forest slowly advanced and silently enwrapped them. The forest led them to a chain of hills. The hills carried them begrudgingly to a valley. The valley flung them into a meadow, which, in turn, by various stages, brought them to another forest, another valley, across lakes, down ravines, over rivers, on and on and on, until at last, when they had almost begun to believe that the trail would never end, weary yet exuberant, they drove into the compound at Fort Mackenzie.

There followed a scene which to Dick at least

seemed somewhat confused and vague. He remembered helping to carry Corporal Rand into the barracks. He recalled a good deal of shouting and laughing. A throng pressed forward, sledges were unloaded, drivers darted here and there. Sandy and Toma joined Dick, and they were standing there, talking excitedly, when a crimson-coated figure pushed his way through the crowd and approached them.

"Welcome back," Constable Whitehall shouted. "Glad to see you all home again. The inspector is waiting for you."

The three boys followed the police orderly to Cameron's office, followed him in a state of mind in which excitement, happiness and relief intermingled. They had expected to find the grizzled police official sitting, as was his wont, sternly erect in his chair, lips pursed, steel-gray eyes levelled upon them. But to their surprise, as the door swung open, revealing the room beyond, the inspector was standing—not behind—but in front of his desk.

The grim look was not there. True, his eyes were upon them, and he did not speak for a moment, as they filed in and halted awkwardly in front of him. Then Dick noticed the smile: warm and friendly, a sort of paternal smile that wholly transfigured and enlivened his features, that had the curious effect of making the boys forget their shyness and feel at

ease. And while Dick was making a mental note of this, Cameron had suddenly come forward and was shaking them by the hand, talking and joking, winking slyly at Constable Whitehall.

"You young rascals! No need to tell me that everything didn't come out all right. Don't try to deceive me. I see it—see it shining in your eyes. Constable Whitehall, bring over those chairs. That's better. Sit down. Now, Dick—— Sit down, I tell you, while Richard here relates his experiences."

In a few words, Dick told his story. Yet he was out of breath when he had finished, and a little incoherent when he tried to answer the few sharp questions Cameron fired at him.

"At any rate," smiled the inspector, "you got there, and you came back. From what you've already told me, I gather that you had trouble at Keechewan. Was that the only trouble you had?"

"Yes, sir," answered the bewildered young leader.

"Why, Dick," Sandy reminded him, "we had trouble on the trail—lots of it."

"So we did," remembered Dick. "I'd forgotten about that. We picked up Lamont on our way back, but Fontaine and the rest left us—skipped out."

"They're here," said Cameron grimly, "—in jail! We can eliminate them. Now, about this Lamont?"

"I shoot him," declared Toma briefly.

"You did?"—sharply.

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"Him bad fellow."

Cameron's mouth twitched at the corners.

"Is he hurt badly?"

"He'll be all right in a few weeks, inspector," Dick came quickly to his chum's rescue.

"Was Toma justified in doing this?" Cameron inquired, turning to Sandy and Dick.

Two young men quickly nodded their affirmation.

"Well, that's all I want to know. I'll overlook it this time, Toma. You've already told me, Dick, about Corporal Rand. Took him to the barracks, you say?"

"Yes."

Inspector Cameron rose from his chair and paced slowly up and down the room. For a time he seemed oblivious of their presence. He had become grim and forbidding now, stern and austere—not at all the companionable and affable person he had been at the beginning of their interview. Dick and Sandy exchanged questioning glances, then their eyes stole furtively toward the door.

The footbeats came to a sudden pause in front of them.

"I'm grateful to all of you—very grateful! I'm

proud of you. Of course, I'll pay you well. You deserve it."

Cameron was smiling again. His voice had lost its sharp edge.

"Now, if there is anything that I can do. If——"

Dick interrupted him. It was the opportunity he had been looking for.

"There's one favor, inspector," he cleared his throat. "There's one thing we'd like—Sandy and Toma and I. You see, we've talked it over. We don't want the money. Money isn't everything. We were glad to help out in an emergency. Glad—but——"

"Yes; yes, my boy. What is it?"

"We'd be ever so much obliged to you, sir, and thankful, if you'd dismiss the charge against Corporal Rand."

If Dick had hurled a bomb under Cameron's desk it could not have caused more consternation and surprise. Whitehall started back and his mouth gaped open. Inspector Cameron blinked, gulped several times, and attempted to cover his confusion by blowing his nose. A deep and oppressive silence settled over the room.

Not until then, did Dick realize that he had committed an unpardonable breach of official etiquette. He had smashed precedent and dignity to bits. He had violated the code. He had taken advantage of his position. As the full consciousness of the enor-

mity of his crime came over him, he hung his head, his cheeks flaming to match the color of the inspector's tunic.

Suddenly the tension snapped. Inspector Cameron broke into a roar of laughter. He slapped his thighs and still choking with merriment, turned to his orderly.

"Whitehall, you—you see how helpless I am. I ask you to become my witness. I'm powerless. This is blackmail. Conduct these young ruffians outside. And, Whitehall——" he paused abruptly.

The constable's heels clicked as he came sharply to attention.

"Yes, sir."

"Tell Corporal Rand that I'll see him at once."

THE END